

ROGER ZELAZNY'S LATEST... THE BELLS OF SHOREDAN

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EDITORIAL

Most of us—at one time or another—have probably been in at least one of those heated discussions during which someone kept insisting that science fiction, by its very nature, is obviously superior to fantasy. You remember, of course, how the rest of it goes: that even with plenty of free-wheeling extrapolation, science fiction still manages to stay fairly close to what science now thinks of as "reality," while fantasy—as irresponsible as ever—keeps right on breaking whatever scientific laws it wants to, just so long as it gains its own purely fictional ends. Naturally all this is based on an assumption not everyone is willing to accept: that somehow it is better to read science fiction that shows us things as they might be than it is to read fantasies that show us what never was or ever can be.

For a long while, we admit, we've been—like most readers, apparently—more impressed by the former view—by the "value" of science fiction—than by the fun of pure fantasy. That is, we used to be—until we began reading through many of the back issues of both *Fantastic* and *Amazing*, looking for top stories that modern readers would enjoy. For the more science fiction we

read—and there's been a lot of it in *Fantastic*, besides the forty years of it in *Amazing*—the more we begin to see that in some ways science fiction is probably closer to fantasy than it is to any "reality" we can point to at any given moment.

If you doubt this, then reread some of the hundreds of stories (in *all* the old magazines) in which the first space flight was made not by Yuri Gagarin but by some bright young scientist (usually American) wealthy enough to build his own spaceship, sometimes in his backyard. And the same obsolescence holds true for most of the standard s-f plots, many of which must have seemed quite plausible at the time, even though reality has now passed them by. Remember too that at the very moment those same stories were being written, they bore only a superficial resemblance—if that—to the future they tried to foresee, but still they were published as science fiction and not as a more sophisticated form of fantasy, which is what they really were all along.

And if that's true, then what about some of those very plausible science-fiction stories you enjoyed so much in recent issues

(Continued on page 127)

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THE BELLS OF SHOREDAN

BY ROGER ZELAZNY

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

NO LIVING THING dwelled in the land of Rahoringhast.

Since an age before this age had the dead realm been empty of sound, save for the crashing of thunders and the *spit-spit* of raindrops ricocheting from off its stonework and the stones. The towers of the Citadel of Rahoring still stood; the great archway from which the gates had been stricken continued to gape, like a mouth frozen in a howl of pain and surprise, of death; the countryside about the place resembled the sterile landscape of the moon.

The rider followed the Way of the Armies, which led at last to that archway and on through into the Citadel. Behind him lay a twisted trail leading downward, downward, and back, toward the South and the West. It ran



Just before the changeover from the old to the new Fantastic, Roger Zelazny (author of "Nine Starships Waiting" and "A Rose for Ecclesiastes") did a couple of tantalizing shorts about Dilvish of Dilfar, who spent two centuries in Hell but returned to defend Portaroy from invasion out of the West. Good as those stories are, they're only as preludes to the full-blown adventure you are about to read. For if Zelazny keeps coming up with heroic fantasy as sinewy as "The Bells of Shoredan," then Conan the Conqueror, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and Cugel the Clever had better make room for one more—Dilvish the Deliverer, called the Damned.



through chill patterns of morning mist which clung, swollen, to the dark and pitted ground, like squadrons of gigantic leeches. It looped about the ancient towers, still standing only by virtue of enchantments placed upon them in foregone days. Black and awesome, high-rearing, and limned in nightmare's clarity, the towers and the Citadel were the final visible extensions of the character of their dead maker: Hohorga, King of the World.

The rider, the green-booted rider who left no footprints when he walked, must have felt something of the dark power which still remained within the place, for he halted and sat silent, staring for a long while at the broken gates and the high battlements. Then he spoke a word to the

black, horse-like thing he rode upon, and they pressed ahead.

As he drew near, he saw that something was moving in the shadows of the archway.

He knew that no living thing dwelled in the land of Rahor-inghast. . . .

* * *

The battle had gone well, considering the number of the defenders.

On the first day, the emissaries of Lylish had approached the walls of Dilfar, sought parley, requested surrender of the city, and been refused. There followed a brief truce, to permit single combat between Lance, the Hand of Lylish, and Dilvish called the Damned, Colonel of the East, Deliverer of Portaroy, scion of the Elvish House of Selar and the human House which hath been stricken.

The trial lasted but a quarter of an hour, until Dilvish, whose wounded leg had caused his collapse, did strike upwards from behind his buckler with the point of his blade. The armor of Lance, which had been deemed invincible, gave way then, when the blade of Dilvish smote at one of the two devices upon the breastplate—those which were cast in the form of cloven hoof-marks. Men muttered that these devices had not been present previously, and an attempt was made to take the Colonel pris-

oner. His horse, however, which had stood on the sidelines like a steel statue, did again come to his aid, bearing him to safety within the city.

The assault was then begun, but the defenders were prepared and held well their walls. Well-fortified and well-provided was Dilfar. Fighting from a position of strength, the defenders cast down much destruction upon the Men of the West.

After four days the army of Lylish had withdrawn with the great rams which it had been unable to use. The Men of the West commenced the construction of helepoli, while they awaited the arrival of catapults from Bildesh.

Above the walls of Dilfar, high in the Keep of Eagles, there were two who watched.

"It will not go well, Lord Dilvish," said the king, whose name was Malacar the Mighty, though he was short of stature and long of year. "If they complete the towers-that-walk and bring catapults, they will strike us from afar. We will not be able to defend against this. Then the towers will walk when we are weakened from the bombardment."

"It is true," said Dilvish.

"Dilfar must not fall."

"No."

"Reinforcements have been sent for, but they are many leagues distant. None were pre-

pared for the assault of Lord Lylish, and it will be long before sufficient troops will be mustered and be come here to the battle."

"That also is true, and by then may it be too late."

"You are said by some to be the same Lord Dilvish who liberated Portaroy in days long gone by."

"I am that Dilvish."

"If so, that Dilvish was of the House of Selar of the Invisible Blade."

"Yes."

"Is it true also, then—what is told of the House of Selar and the Bells of Shoredan in Rahoringhast?"

Malacar looked away as he said it.

"This thing I do not know," said Dilvish. "I have never attempted to raise the cursed legions of Shoredan. My grandmother told me that only twice in all the ages of Time has this been done. I have also read of it in the Green Books of Time at the Keep of Mirata. I do not know, however."

"Only to one of the House of Selar will the bells respond. Else they swing noiseless, it is said."

"So is it said."

"Rahoringhast lies far to the North and the East and distressful is the way. One with a mount such as yours might make the journey, might ring there the

bells, might call forth the doomed legions, though. It is said they will follow such a one of Selar to battle."

"Aye, this thought has come to me, also."

"Willst essay this thing?"

"Aye, Sir. Tonight. I am already prepared."

"Kneel then and receive thou my blessing, Dilvish of Selar. I knew thou wert he when I saw thee on the field before these walls."

And Dilvish did kneel and receive the blessing of Malacar, called the Mighty, Leige of the Eastern Reach, whose realm held Dilfar, Bildesh, Mystar, Mycar, Portaroy, Princeaton and Poind.

* * *

The way was difficult, but the passage of leagues and hours was as the movement of clouds. The western portal to Dilfar had within it a smaller passing-place, a man-sized door studded with spikes and slitted for the discharge of bolts.

Like a shutter in the wind, this door opened and closed. Crouched low, mounted on a piece of the night, the Colonel passed out through the opening and raced across the plain, entering for a moment the outskirts of the enemy camp.

A cry went up as he rode, and weapons rattled in the darkness.

Sparks flew from unshod steel hooves.

"All the speed at thy command now, Black, my mount!"

He was through the campsite and away before arrow could be set to bow.

High on the hill to the east, a small fire throbbed in the wind. Pennons, mounted on tall poles, flapped against the night, and it was too dark for Dilvish to read the devices thereon, but he knew that they stood before the tents of Lylish, Colonel of the West.

Dilvish spoke the words in the language of the damned, and as he spoke them the eyes of his mount glowed like embers in the night. The small fire on the hill-top leapt, one great leaf of flame, to the height of four men. It did not reach the tent, however. Then there was no fire at all, only the embers of all the fuels consumed in a single moment.

Dilvish rode on, and the hooves of Black made lightning on the hillside.

They pursued him a small while only. Then he was away and alone.

All that night did he ride through places of rock. Shapes reared high above him and fell again, like staggering giants surprised in their drunkenness. He felt himself launched, countless times, through empty air, and when he looked down on these occasions, there was only empty air beneath him.

With the morning, there came

a levelling of his path, and the far edge of the Eastern Plain lay before him, then under him. His leg began to throb beneath its dressing, but he had lived in the Houses of Pain for more than the lifetimes of Men, and he put the feeling far from his thoughts.

After the sun had raised itself over the jagged horizon at his back, he stopped to eat and to drink, to stretch his limbs.

In the sky then, he saw the shapes of the nine black doves who must circle the world forever, never to land, seeing all things on the earth and on the sea, and passing all things by.

"An omen," he said. "Be it a good one?"

"I know not," replied the creature of steel.

"Then let us make haste to learn."

He remounted.

For four days did he pass over the Plain, until the yellow and green waving grasses gave way and the land lay sandy before him.

The winds of the desert cut at his eyes. He fixed his scarf as a muffle, but it could not stop the entire assault. When he would cough and spit, he needed to lower it, and the sand entered again. He would blink and his face would burn, and he would curse, but no spell he knew could lay the entire desert like yellow tapestry, smooth and unruffled

below him. Black was an opposing wind, and the airs of the land rushed to contest his passage.

On the third day in the desert, a mad wight flew invisible and gibbering at his back. Even Black could not outrun it, and it ignored the foulest imprecations of Mabrahoring, language of the demons and the damned.

The following day, more joined with it. They would not pass the protective circle in which Dilvish slept, but they screamed across his dreams—meaningless fragments of a dozen tongues—troubling his sleep.

He left them when he left the desert. He left them as he entered the land of stone and marshes and gravel and dark pools and evil openings in the ground from which the fumes of the underworld came forth.

He had come to the border of Rahoringhast.

It was damp and gray, everywhere.

It was misty in places, and the water oozed forth from the rocks, came up from out of the ground.

There were no trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses. No birds sang, no insects hummed.

... No living thing dwelled in the land of Rahoringhast.

* * *

Dilvish rode on and entered through the broken jaws of the city.

All within was shadow and ruin.

He passed up the Way of the Armies.

Silent was Rahoringhast, a city of the dead.

He could feel this, not as the silence of nothingness now, but as the silence of a still presence.

Only the steel cloven hooves sounded within the city.

There came no echoes.

Sound.... Nothing. Sound.... Nothing. Sound....

It was as though something unseen moved to absorb every evidence of life as soon as it noised itself.

Red was the Palace, like bricks hot from the kiln and flushed with the tempers of their making. But of one piece were the walls. No seams nor cracks, no divisions were there in the sheet of red. It was solid, was imponderable, broad of base, and reached with its thirteen towers higher than any building Dilvish had ever seen, though he had dwelled in the high Keep of Mirata itself, where the Lords of Illusion hold sway, bending space to their will.

Dilvish dismounted and regarded the enormous stairway that lay before him.

"That which we seek lies within."

Black nodded and touched the first stair with his hoof. Fire rose from the stone. He drew back his hoof and smoke curled about it.

There was no mark upon the stair to indicate where he had touched.

"I fear I cannot enter this place and preserve my form," he stated. "At the least, my form."

"What compels thee?"

"An ancient enchantment to preserve this place against the assault of any such as I."

"Can it be undone?"

"Not by any creature which walks this world, or flies above it or writhes beneath it, or I'm a horse. Though the seas some day rise and cover the land, this place will exist at their bottom. This was torn from Chaos by Order in the days when those Principles stalked the land, naked, just beyond the hills. Whoever compelled them was one of the First, and powerful even in terms of the Mighty."

"Then I must go alone."

"Perhaps not. One is approaching even now with whom you had best wait and parley."

Dilvish waited, and a single horseman emerged from a distant street and advanced upon them.

"Greetings," called the rider, raising his right hand, open.

"Greetings." Dilvish returned the gesture.

The man dismounted. His costume was deep violet in color, the hood thrown back, the cloak all-engulfing. He bore no visible arms.

"Why stand you here before

the Citadel of Rahoring?" he asked.

"Why stand you here to ask me, priest of Babrigore?" said Dilvish, and not ungently.

"I am spending the time of a moon in this place of death, to dwell upon the ways of evil. It is to prepare myself as head of my temple."

"You are young to be head of a temple."

The priest shrugged and smiled.

"Few come to Rahoringhast," he observed.

"Small wonder," did Dilvish reply. "I trust I shall not remain here long."

"Were you planning on entering this—place?" He gestured.

"I was, and am."

The man was half a head shorter than Dilvish, and it was impossible to guess at his form beneath the robes he wore. His eyes were blue and he was swarthy of complexion. A mole on his left eyelid danced when he blinked.

"Let me beg you reconsider this action," he stated. "It would be unwise to enter this building."

"Why is that?"

"It is said that it is still guarded within by the ancient warders of its Lord."

"Have you ever been inside?"

"Yes."

"Were you troubled by any ancient wardens?"

"No, but as a priest of Babrigore I am under the protection of — of — Jelerak."

Dilvish spat.

"May his flesh be flayed from his bones and its life yet remain."

The priest dropped his eyes.

"Though he fought the creature which dwelled within this place," said Dilvish, "he became as foul himself afterwards."

"Many of his deeds do lie like stains upon the land," said the priest, "but he was not always such a one. He was a white wizard who matched his powers against the Dark One, in days when the world was young. He was not sufficient. He fell. He was taken as servant by the Maleficent. For centuries he endured this bondage, until it changed him, as such must. He, too, came to glory in the ways of darkness. But then, when Selar of the Unseen Blade bought the life of Hohorga with his own, Jel — he fell as if dead and lay as such for the space of a week. Near-delirious, when he awakened, he worked with counterspell at one last act of undoing: to free the cursed legions of Shoredan. He essayed that thing. He did. He stood upon this very stairway for two days and two nights, until the blood mingled with the perspiration on his brow, but he could not break the hold of Hohorga. Even dead, the dark strength was too great for him.

Then he wandered mad about the countryside, until he was taken in and cared for by the priests of Babrigore. Afterwards, he lapsed back into the ways he had learned, but he has always been kindly disposed toward the Order which cared for him. He has never asked anything more of us. He has sent us food in times of famine. Speak no evil of him in my presence."

Dilvish spat again.

"May he thrash in the darkness of darknesses for the ages of ages, and may his name be cursed forever."

The priest looked away from the sudden blaze in his eyes.

"What want you in Rahoring?" he asked, finally.

"To go within — and do a thing."

"If you must, then I shall accompany you. Perhaps my protection shall also extend to yourself."

"I do not solicit your protection, priest."

"The asking is not necessary."

"Very well. Come with me then."

He started up the stairway.

"What is that thing you ride?" asked the priest, gesturing back. "— Like a horse in form, but now it is a statue."

Dilvish laughed.

"I, too, know something of the ways of darkness, but my terms with it are my own."

"No man may have special terms with darkness."

"Tell it to a dweller in the Houses of Pain, priest. Tell it to a statue. Tell it to one who is all of the race of Men! Tell it not to me."

"What is your name?"

"Dilvish. What is yours?"

"Korel. I shall speak to you no more of darkness then, Dilvish, but I will still go with you into Rahoring."

"Then stand not talking." Dilvish turned and continued upward.

Korel followed him.

When they had gone halfway, the daylight began to grow dim about them. Dilvish looked back. All he could see was the stairway leading down and down, back. There was nothing else in the world but the stairs. With each step upward, the darkness grew.

"Did it happen thus when last you entered this place?" he asked.

"No," said Korel.

They reached the top of the stair and stood before the dim portal. By then it was as though night lay upon the land.

They entered.

A sound, as of music, came from far ahead and there was a flickering light within. Dilvish laid his hand upon the hilt of his sword. The priest whispered to him: "It will do you no good."

They moved up the passageway

and came at length into a vacant hall. Braziers spewed flame from high sockets in the walls. The ceiling was lost in shadow and smoke.

They crossed that hall to where a wide stair led up into a blaze of light and sound.

Korel looked back.

"It begins with the light," said he, "all this newness," gesturing. "The outer passage bore only rubble and . . . dust . . ."

"What else is the matter?" Dilvish looked back.

Only one set of footprints led into the hall through the dust. Dilvish then laughed, saying: "I tread lightly."

Korel studied him. Then he blinked and his mole jerked across his eye.

"When I entered here before," he said, "there were no sounds, no torches. Everything lay empty and still, ruined. Do you know what is happening?"

"Yes," said Dilvish, "for I read of it in the Green Books of Time at the Keep of Mirata. Know, oh priest of Babrigore, that within the hall above the ghosts do play at being ghosts. Know, too, that Hohorga dies again and again so long as I stand within this place."

As he spoke the name Hohorga a great cry was heard within the high hall. Dilvish raced up the stairs, the priest rushing after him.

Now, within the halls of Rahor-

ing there came up a mighty wailing.

They stood at the top of the stairs, Dilvish like a statue, blade half-drawn from its sheath; Korel, hands within his sleeves, praying after the manner of his order.

The remains of a great feast were strewn about the hall; the light came down out of the air from colored globes which circled like planets through the great heaven-design within the vaulted ceiling; the throne on the high dais beside the far wall was empty. That throne was too large for any of this age to occupy. The walls were covered all over with ancient devices, strange, on alternate slabs of white and orange marble. In the pillars of the wall were set gems the size of doubled fists, burning yellow and emerald, infraruby and ultrablue, casting a fire-radiance, transparent and illuminating, as far as the steps to the throne. The canopy of the throne was wide and all of white gold, worked in the manner of mermaids and harpies, dolphins and goat-headed snakes; it was supported by wyvern, hippogriff, fire-drake, chimaera, unicorn, cockatrice, griffin and pegasus, sejant erect. It belonged to the one who lay dying upon the floor.

In the form of a man, but half again as large, Hohorga lay upon the tiles of his palace and his

intestines filled his lap. He was supported by three of his Guard, while the rest attended to his slayer. It had been said in the Books of Time that Hohorga the Maleficent was indescribable. Dilvish saw that this was both true and untrue.

He was fair to look upon and noble of feature; but so blindingly fair was he that all eyes were averted from that countenance now lined with pain. A faint bluish halo was diminishing about his shoulders. Even in the death-pain he was as cold and perfect as a carved gemstone set upon the redgreen cushion his blood; his was the hypnotic perfection of a snake of many colors. It is said that eyes have no expression of their own, and that one could not reach into a barrel of eyes and separate out those of an angry man or those of one's beloved.

Hohorga's eyes were the eyes of a ruined god: infinitely sad, as proud as an ocean of lions.

One look and Dilvish knew this thing, though he could not tell their color.

Hohorga was of the blood of the First.

The guards had cornered the slayer. He fought them, apparently empty-handed, but parrying and thrusting as though he gripped a blade. Wherever his hand moved, there were wounds.

He wielded the only weapon

which might have slain the king of the world, who permitted none to go armed in his presence, save for his own Guard.

He bore the Invisible Blade.

He was Selar, first of the Elvish House of that name, great-gone sire of Dilvish, who at that moment cried out his name.

Dilvish drew his blade and rushed across the hall. He cut at the attackers, but his blade passed through them as through smoke.

They beat down Selar's guard. A mighty blow sent something unseen ringing across the hall. Then they dismembered him, slowly, Selar of Shoredan, as Dilvish wept, watching.

And then Hohorga spoke, in a voice held firm though soft, without inflection, like the steady beating of surf or the hooves of horses:

"I have outlived the one who presumed to lay hands upon me, which is as it must be. Know that it was written that eyes would never see the blade that could slay me. Thus do the Powers have their jokes. Much of what I have done shall never be undone, o children of Men and Elves and Salamanders. Much more than you know do I take with me from this world into the Silence. You have slain that which was greater than yourselves, but do not be proud. It matters no longer to me. Nothing



does. Have my curses."

Those eyes closed and there was a clap of thunder.

Dilvish and Korel stood alone in the darkened ruins of a great hall.

"Why did this thing appear today?" asked the priest.

"When one of the blood of Selar enters here," said Dilvish, "it is re-enacted."

"Why have you come here, Dilvish, son of Selar?"

"To ring the Bells of Shoredan."

"It cannot be."

"If I am to save Dilfar and redeliver Portaroy it *must* be.

"I go now to seek the Bells,"



he said.

He crossed through the near-blackness of night without stars, for neither were his eyes the eyes of Men, and he was accustomed to much dark.

He heard the priest following after him.

They circled behind the broken bulk of the Earth-Lord's throne. Had there been sufficient light as they passed, they would have seen darkened spots upon the floor turning to stain, then crisp sand-brown, and then to red-green blood, or something like blood, as Dilvish moved near them, and vanishing once again as he moved away.

Behind the dais was the door to the central tower. Fevera Mirata, Queen of Illusion, had once shown Dilvish this hall in a mirror the size of six horsemen riding abreast, and brodered about with a frame of golden daffodils which hid their heads till it cleared of all save their reflections.

Dilvish opened the door and halted. Smoke billowed forth, engulfing him. He was seized with coughing but he kept his guard before him.

"It is the Warden of the Bells!" cried Korel. "Jelerak deliver us!"

"Damn Jelerak!" said Dilvish. "I'll deliver myself!"

But as he spoke, the cloud swirled away and spun itself into a glowing tower that held the doorway, illuminating the throne and the places about the throne. Two red eyes glowed within the smoke.

Dilvish passed his blade through and through the cloud, meeting with no resistance.

"If you remain incorporeal, I shall pass through you," he called out. "If you take a shape, I shall dismember it. Make your choice," and he said it in Mabrahoring, the language spoken in Hell.

"Deliverer, Deliverer, Deliverer," hissed the cloud, "my pet Dilvish, little creature of hooks and chains. Do you not know your master? Is your memory

so short?" and the cloud collapsed upon itself and coalesced into a bird-headed creature with the hindquarters of a lion and two serpents growing up from its shoulders, curling and engendering about its high crest of flaming quills.

"Cal-den!"

"Aye, your old tormentor, Elfman. I have missed you, for few depart my care. It is time you returned."

"This time," said Dilvish, "I am not chained and unarmed, and we meet in my world," and he cut forward with his blade, striking the serpent-head from Cal-den's left shoulder.

A piercing bird-cry filled the hall and Cal-den sprang forward.

Dilvish struck at his breast but the blade was turned aside, leaving only a smallish gash from which a pale liquor flowed.

Cal-den struck him then backward against the dais, catching his blade in a black claw, shattering it, and he raised his other arm to smite him. Dilvish did then stab upward with what remained of the sword, nine inches of jagged length.

It caught Cal-den beneath the jaw, entering there and remaining, the hilt torn from Dilvish's hand as the tormentor shook his head, roaring.

Then was Dilvish seized about the waist so that his bones did sigh and creak within him. He

felt himself raised into the air, the serpent tearing at his ear, claws piercing his sides. Cal-den's face was turned up toward him, wearing the hilt of his blade like a beard of steel.

Then did he hurl Dilvish across the dais, so as to smash him against the tiles of the floor.

But the wearer of the green boots of Elfland may not fall or be thrown to land other than on his feet.

Dilvish did recover him then, but the shock of his landing caused pain in the thigh-wound he bore. His leg collapsed beneath him, so that he put out his hand to the side.

Cal-den did then spring upon him, smiting him sorely about the head and shoulders. From somewhere, Korel hurled a stone which struck upon the demon's crest.

Dilvish scrambled backwards, until his hand came upon a thing in the rubble which drew the blood from it.

A blade.

He snatched at the hilt and brought it up off the floor with a side-armed cut that struck Cal-den across the back, stiffening him into a bellow that near burst the ears to hear. Smoke arose from the wound.

Dilvish stood, and saw that he held nothing.

Then did he know that the blade of his ancestor, which no

eyes may look upon, had come to him from the ruins where it had lain across the ages, to serve him, scion of the House of Selar, in this moment of his need.

He directed it toward the breast of Cal-den.

"My rabbit, you are unarmed, yet you have cut me," said the creature. "Now shall we return to the Houses of Pain."

They both lunged forward.

"I always knew," said Cal-den, "that my little Dilvish was something special," and he fell to the floor with an enormous crash and the smokes arose from his body.

Dilvish placed his heel upon the carcass and wrenched free the blade outlined in steaming ichor.

"To you, Selar, do I owe this victory," he said, and raised a length of smouldering nothingness in salute. Then he sheathed the sword.

Korel was at his side. He watched as the creature at their feet vanished like embers and ice, leaving behind a stench that was most foul to smell.

Dilvish turned him again to the door of the tower and entered there, Korel at his side.

The broken bell-pull lay at his feet. It fell to dust when he touched it with his toe.

"It is said," he told Korel, "that the bell-pull did break in the hands of the last to ring it,

half an age ago."

He raised his eyes, and there was only darkness above him.

"The legions of Shoredan did set forth to assault the Citadel of Rahoring," said the priest, as though reading it from some old parchment, "and word of their movement came soon to the King of the World. Then did he lay upon three bells cast in Shoredan a weird. When these bells were rung a great fog came over the land and engulfed the columns of marchers and those on horseback. The fog did disperse upon the second ringing of the bells, and the land was found to be empty of the troop. It was later written by Merda, Red Wizard of the South, that somewhere still do these marchers and horsemen move, through regions of eternal fog. 'If these bells be rung again by a hand of that House which dispatched the layer of the weird, then will these legions come forth from a mist to serve that one for a time in battle. But when they have served, they will vanish again into the places of gloom, where they will continue their march upon a Rahoringhast which no longer exists. How they may be freed to rest, this thing is not known. One mightier than I has tried and failed.'"

Dilvish bowed his head a moment, then he felt the walls. They were not like the outer

walls. They were cast of blocks of that same material, and between those blocks were scant crevices wherein his fingers found purchase.

He raised himself above the floor and commenced to climb, the soft greenboots somehow finding footholds wherever they struck.

The air was hot and stale, and showers of dust descended upon him each time he raised an arm above his head.

He pulled himself upwards, until he counted a hundred such movements and the nails of his hands were broken. Then he clung to the wall like a lizard, resting, and felt the pains of his last encounter burning like suns within him.

He breathed the fetid air and his head swam. He thought of the Portaroy he had once delivered, long ago, the city of friends, the place where he had once been feted, the land whose need for him had been strong enough to free him from the Houses of Pain and break the grip of stone upon his body; and he thought of that Portaroy in the hands of the Colonel of the West, and he thought of Dylfar now resisting that Lylish who might sweep the bastions of the East before him.

He climbed once again.

His head touched the metal lip of a bell.

He climbed around it, bracing

himself on the crossbars which now occurred.

There were three bells suspended from a single axle.

He set his back against the wall and clung to the crossbars, placing his feet upon the middle bell.

He pushed, straightening his legs.

The axle protested, creaking and grinding within its sockets.

But the bell moved, slowly. It did not return, however, but stayed in the position into which it had been pushed.

Cursing, he worked his way through the crossbars and over to the opposite side of the belfry.

He pushed it back and it stuck on the other side. All the bells moved with the axle, though.

Nine times more did he cross over in darkness to push at the bells.

Then they moved more easily.

Slowly, they fell back as he released the pressure of his legs. He pushed them out again and they returned again. He pushed them again, and again.

A click came from one of the bells as the clapper struck. Then another. Finally, one of them rang.

He kicked out harder and harder, and then did the bells swing free and fill the tower about him with a pealing which vibrated the roots of his teeth and filled his ears with pain. A storm of dust came down over him and

his eyes were full of tears. He coughed and closed them. He let the bells grow still.

Across some mighty distance he thought he heard the faint winding of a horn.

He began the downward climb.

"Lord Dilvish," said Korel, when he had reached the floor. "I have heard the blowing of horns."

"Yes," said Dilvish.

"I have a flask of wine with me. Drink."

Dilvish rinsed his mouth and spat, then drank three mighty swallows.

"Thank you, priest. Let us be gone from here now."

They crossed through the hall once more and descended the inner stair. The smaller hall was now unlighted and lay in ruin. They made their way out, Dilvish leaving no tracks to show where he had gone; and halfway down the stairs the darkness departed from them.

Through the bleak day that now clung to the land, Dilvish looked back along the Way of the Armies. A mighty fog filled the air far beyond the broken gates, and from within that fog there came again the notes of the horn and the sounds of the movements of troops. Almost, Dilvish could see the outlines of the columns of marchers and riders, moving, moving, but not advancing.

"My troops await me," said

Dilvish upon the stair. "Thank you, Korel, for accompanying me."

"Thank you, Lord Dilvish. I came to this place to dwell upon the ways of evil. You have shown me much that I may meditate upon."

They descended the final stairs. Dilvish brushed dust from his garments and mounted Black.

"One thing more, Korel, priest of Babrigore," he said. "If you ever meet with your patron, who should provide you much more evil to meditate upon than you have seen here, tell him that, when all the battles have been fought, his statue will come to kill him."

The mole danced as Korel blinked up at him.

"Remember," he replied, "that once he wore a mantle of light."

Dilvish laughed, and the eyes of his mount glowed red through the gloom.

"There!" he said, gesturing. "There is your sign of his goodness and light!"

Nine black doves circled in the heavens.

Korel bowed his head and did not answer.

"I go now to lead my legions."

Black reared on steel hooves and laughed along with his rider.

Then they were gone, up the Way of the Armies, leaving the Citadel of Rahoring and the priest of Babrigore behind them in the gloom.

THE END

HARDLY WORTH MENTIONING

By CHAD OLIVER

The last Oliver story we ran ("Final Exam" in the December Amazing) drew so much favorable response that we're glad to oblige with another one—really long this time—rich with that special kind of anthropological invention that ever since "Artifact" has marked most of his work in the field. In "Hardly Worth Mentioning" its focal point is young Bill Shackelford, head of a field school of archeologists digging in Mexico, whose bright future is smashed to pieces when one of his students uncovers a very modern-looking disc of gear-shaped plastic that couldn't have been but was dropped in the dust of a prehistoric Indian village two thousand years ago!

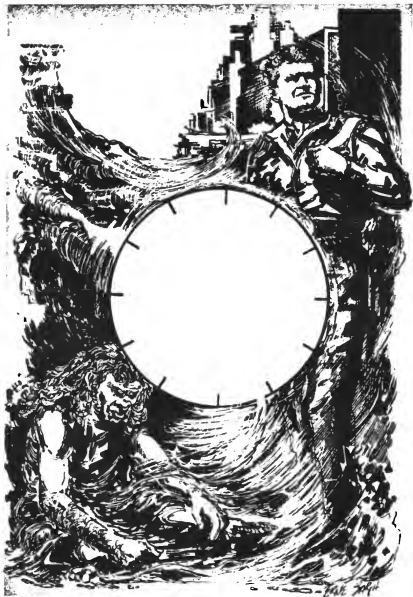
For Shackelford, it started in Mexico.

The sun had climbed steadily upward through a cloudless blue sky until it was almost directly overhead, and there was no trace whatever left of the clammy dampness that had filled the early morning air. It was, in fact, getting hot. Bill Shackelford balanced his clipboard on his knee, shifted his position slightly on the unreliable canvas camp stool, and wished that the cook detail would holler them down for lunch.

"Oh boy," said Carl England from the trench. "The find of the year."

The others looked over briefly to see what he had, and then went back to scraping the hard earth methodically with their trowels. John Symmes and Jim Fecho were still kidding around about last night's stew, but the others were mainly killing time until lunch. Which, Shackelford had to admit, was just about what he was doing.

"What've you got?" he asked Carl, knowing full well what it was.



"Potsherd."

"Better measure it in. Symmes, you and Fecho get on the tape."

Symmes and Fecho flipped to see who got the stake end of the tape, then proceeded in slow motion to get the coordinates and datum point on the piece of pottery, which Shackelford duly recorded and glanced at when Carl tossed it to him. It was a fragment of plain gray ware, as usual, and he bagged it without much interest.

The others went on with their desultory scraping in the dirt and Shackelford stood up and stretched. He was six feet tall and a trifle on the thin side, and his bright new Ph.D. was well concealed under his old army shirt and dusty blue jeans. This was the first field school he had run by himself, and they had been lucky. He could not entirely subdue the soft glow of pride that ran through him when he looked at the rectangular excavation and at the students, most of whom reminded him of himself a few short years ago. Just the same, he was getting hungry. He glanced at his watch. Ten after twelve. He pulled out an ungainly red handkerchief and blew his nose, and that was when it happened.

As usual when something interesting turned up, nobody said anything at first. But to his practiced eye the signs were unmistakable: all the students had

stopped digging by tacit agreement and were watching Charles Kelley clear something in his square. There were other signs as well — the very air seemed cooler, and all at once no one was tired any longer, and even lunch was pushed momentarily into the background.

Shackelford walked over, trying to see through the knot of spectators, and wondered what it was. There was a slight buzz of conversation, an undertone of interest, but he couldn't make anything out of the scattered words and wisecracks.

"What is it?" he asked, and the others fell back to let him through.

Charles Kelley, who was a graduate student who knew his business thoroughly, looked up and grinned. "You tell me," he said. He hoisted himself up from his archeologist's crouch and moved back to let Shackelford look.

Shackelford squatted down and looked at the thing in the bottom of the trench, still imbedded in the earth. He dusted it with his whisk broom and got down closer. He scratched his head and cleared it a little around the edges with his sharp brick-layer trowel and looked again.

It still didn't make sense.

It wasn't anything spectacular, and in other circumstances it would hardly have attracted at-

tention at all. It was a round object, about six inches in diameter, and it seemed to have cogs around the edges. It was hard, like pottery, but it didn't *feel* like pottery. It was too dirty to tell him much, but he knew immediately that this thing — whatever it was — didn't belong in a prehistoric Indian village on the Mexican hillside.

"Well," asked Kelley, not entirely without malice, "what is it?"

"You got me," Shackelford admitted. And then he added lamely: "Must be some sort of ceremonial object."

"Looks like a gear to me," John Symmes smiled.

"Maybe it belongs to an ancient Chevrolet," suggested Jim Fecho.

Shackelford grinned, but he wasn't feeling too happy. What *was* the thing? What was it doing here? "Carl," he said, "get a picture of this in place before we take it out, just in case. Some of you guys measure it in, will you? Then we'll grab some lunch, ready or not."

He took out his pocket tape and got a rough depth measurement from the surface. Thirty centimeters. Hardly a vast distance, of course — but still it definitely wasn't surface. What *was* it?

He heard the Rollei click softly as Carl got his pictures, and he

took down the coordinates and datum as Symmes and Fecho called them out. Then he carefully removed the disc with his pocket knife, looked at it once, and started down the hill for lunch, carrying it in his hand.

That was the way it started.

His wife, Dawn, had been on the cook detail, and so the canned meat and beans had been rendered fairly edible for a change. Shackelford ate hungrily at the plank table under the sagging sheet of canvas and, not for the first time, occupied his mind by thinking up grisly fates for the young lady who had faked her references as a camp cook and who had turned out to be one of those joyless females whose very proximity caused the food to give up and collapse.

After lunch, during the brief siesta which gave the clouds a chance to reform their ranks for what the students referred to as the Daily Typhoon, he took the thing out of his pocket and showed it to Dawn. He had cleaned it superficially, and two things were clear: it wasn't pottery, and it did have neat, regular cogs in it.

Dawn gave up trying to straighten their little tent and looked at it, her rather impish eyes belying the ethereal quality of her name. "Could be a plant," she suggested. "Remember the story that Dr. Mac tells about the

cigar store Indian in Chicago?"

Bill settled himself on the cot and frowned. "I saw it in place," he said, "but of course that could have been faked. But I don't much think it's a plant; these are all pretty serious students, even with all the kidding around. If anyone did pull a stunt like that, it would be Symmes, Fecho or Kelley—and it's not a clever enough plant for that. Something like a Folsom point or a bit of Eskimo carving would be more down their alley. This thing doesn't fit at all; it just simply doesn't belong there."

He looked at it. There it was—quiet, unfrightening, a little absurd. Just a neat disc of something that looked like plastic, dug out of the earth where it never could have been. Even in the higher cultures of central Mexico it would have been an utter anachronism, and here, in a relatively simple farming village, it was out of the question. The Indians weren't using any plastics two thousand years ago—nor any wheels of any type, much less a wheel with gear cogs on it. The closest thing to it that had turned up amidst the scrapers and manos and projectile points of the site on the hill had been a small pottery spindle whorl, which was a far cry from the thing he held.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Dawn, cocking an eyebrow.

Shackelford shrugged. "What *can* I do with it? It doesn't fit in context, it doesn't belong up there. The only thing to do with it is to call it intrusive and file it away somewhere. It's like digging up a Neanderthal in Kansas. The best thing to do is to just cover him up again, unless you want the whole profession knifing you in the back."

"Ummm," said Dawn.

"What does that mean? You know there weren't any Neanderthals to be found in the New World."

"As far as we know," corrected Dawn. "Science is supposed to be self-correcting, remember? No dogmas."

"Ummm," Shackelford said in turn, and lapsed into silence. Dawn was right, of course, as usual. He didn't really believe for a minute that the disc was intrusive, that it just "happened" to be in the site, thirty centimeters underground. That, to him, was fantastic. The big questions were: how did it get there, and what did it mean?

He began to wonder. How many other inexplicable, unsensational artifacts had been dug up in archeological sites, then quietly filed away somewhere because their finders had been trained to believe that they couldn't have been found where they had been found? Every archeologist could tell plenty of stories about things

that didn't fit. The whole picture of early man was undergoing extensive revision, but you didn't read anything about it in the technical journals. There were certain things that just weren't talked about.

Why?

Shackelford looked at the thing in his hand again and felt a queer tingling along his spine. He put it back in his pocket and got to his feet.

"Back to work," he said. "Better bring your raincoat, hon, and go by and wake up Betty and Jenkins before you come up."

As if to punctuate his words, the afternoon's first thunder muttered above them in the mountains, and a cool breeze rustled across the valley floor.

The afternoon passed without incident, aside from the expected rain, and supper was unusually good, someone having managed to pick up some filets in Toplanque. It was after eight when Shackelford saw the jeep coming down the ranch road and got up from the poker game to greet their host.

One problem that an archeological field party encountered in Mexico was a place to stay. After you were greeted profusely by the mayor and the governor and all the town dignitaries, you still had to have a site to pitch your camp on. This had been

solved in Shackelford's case by the foreman of a large American-owned ranch in the hills thirty miles from Toplanque, and periodically they got a courtesy call from the ranch owner, Thomas Fitz-James, when he was in the vicinity. Fitz-James was a very wealthy beer manufacturer who kept three ranches in Mexico as hideaways for his children on summer vacations.

The jeep stopped and Fitz-James telescoped out from behind the wheel. "Telescoped" was literally the right word, Shackelford thought, but even that left something to be desired. Fitz-James was the biggest man Shackelford had ever seen. An incredible seven feet two inches tall, he was perfectly proportioned, and at a distance seemed to be merely a tall man. But when he came toward you and kept looming larger and larger he gave you the creeps.

"Howdy," said Shackelford, extending his hand to be crushed.

"Good evening," said Fitz-James in a well-modulated, only slightly arrogant voice. "I just flew in from Cuba and thought I'd stop by to see how you folks are getting along."

"Won't you have some coffee?" Shackelford felt dwarfed and uneasy which, he told himself, was ridiculous. Fitz-James had been a perfect host.

"Thank you, no. I'm expecting

some people at the ranch tonight. I hope you've found your digging here interesting?"

"Fine so far," Shackelford told him. "We did find a rather curious thing today."

"Oh?" said Fitz-James, towering over him, his gray hair silver in the early starlight.

"Nothing very interesting to look at, I'm afraid — just a little plastic disc that looks like a gear or something. You haven't been running any experimental machinery on the hill, I don't suppose?"

Fitz-James laughed softly. "Hardly," he said. "Perhaps one of the men dropped it up there, however." He didn't seem particularly interested, and Shackelford remembered that his first question had probably been simply a matter of courtesy. "If I can be of any help, just let me know," the giant continued. "Goodnight to you."

"Goodnight," said Shackelford, and watched him leave through the darkness.

Quite suddenly, for no reason at all, the night seemed cold and lonely.

That night, lying in his sleeping bag in the tent, Shackelford stayed awake for a long time. He smoked three cigarettes and watched the little V of stars that glittered through the tent flap. He heard Dawn's regular breathing

by his side, and he lay very still so as not to disturb her.

The little stream fifty yards from his tent chuckled by softly in the darkness outside and a gentle breeze tugged at the canvas over his head. It was cool, but not cold, and there was a smell of pines in the air. It was an unusually fine night for the rainy season.

Shackelford usually had no trouble sleeping, and he was annoyed with himself. He thought about a lot of things, but he knew what was keeping him awake. It was the plastic disc, now sitting in a cardboard box under his cot. The thing was certainly commonplace enough, in a way. There was nothing alarming about it, nothing exciting. Most people would have simply written it off as one of those things and forgotten about it.

But Shackelford couldn't understand it, and that bothered him. He had been around too long. He knew that the phrase "just one of those things" didn't mean anything. *Everything* was important once you had the key, once you could read it. Shackelford didn't respect theories overmuch; each year saw a brand new crop of "correct" theories. But evidence was something else again, and that disc was evidence. If he couldn't interpret the evidence, he reasoned, that was his fault, not that of the evidence.

"Damn it," he said aloud.

To most people it wouldn't have been anything at all. But Bill Shackelford wasn't most people. If he had been, he would not have been here at all, in a little tent in the mountains of Mexico. The thing haunted him.

It was late when he finally fell asleep, and he dreamed about giants. In the morning, when he woke up to call the cooks, the cardboard box under his cot was still there.

But the plastic disc was gone.

II

"We really have no choice, you know," Thomas Fitz-James said quietly.

The Advisor smiled. The trip had been hurried and rather inconvenient, but he was glad to see Fitz-James again, and he was feeling relaxed and sociable. "Nothing to be alarmed about, Fitz," he said. "You're jumping to conclusions again."

Fitz-James sipped his wine slowly and tapped his finger on the table, his ruby ring giving a soft blood-glow under the lamp. "I'm jumping to exactly one conclusion," he said evenly, "and it's this: I want to go on living the way I have been living, and I want my children to have the chance to do the same."

There was a moment of silence while the Advisor digested this.

The two men — Fitz-James was slightly taller than the Advisor, but both men topped seven feet handily — faced each other across a polished wood table in a back room of the ranch house. They were comfortable in sturdy, well-upholstered armchairs and while they were quite sober, they were feeling their wine pleasantly. There was no tenseness in the room; the keynote was rather that of grace and urbanity, and both men spoke softly, with the assurance of a lifetime of habit. Strident or unpleasant speech, of course, would have been a social error of grave magnitude.

"An Erasure would be quite time-consuming, naturally," the Advisor pointed out, pouring another glass of wine from the iced bottle on the table. "And no pun intended."

"I am aware of that," Fitz-James said, filling his pipe with fragrant tobacco and lighting it with a special jet lighter. "I might suggest, however, that it is a small investment indeed when weighed against the possible consequences."

The Advisor smiled again. Poor Fitz was getting old; he was beginning to worry about trivia. "Suppose we simply do nothing, Fitz — do you seriously believe that any harm will come of it?"

Fitz-James blew a lazy smoke ring at the ceiling. "There are two possible answers to your ques-

tion, my friend. The first is that isolated events, of themselves, are seldom as important or significant as we think they are. The most momentous and obvious crises are all made possible by a million other events, known and unknown, that have combined to render them meaningful. If the first fish had never flopped out into the mud, we would not be here tonight. The time to take action is *before* the situation becomes critical, not after. The second answer is that this fellow Shackelford does not impress me as a fool. He is not stupid, and it would be a tactical error to treat him as though he were. I would remind you that we have not attained our present position on this planet by underestimating the opposition. Agreed?"

"Perhaps, perhaps." The Advisor sipped his wine. "It is your opinion, then, that this man will not lose interest of his own accord if he is let alone?"

"That is my opinion, yes."

"And you don't think that an Erasure at this point will only stimulate his curiosity further?"

Fitz-James shrugged. "The old question," he said. "We can't know for certain what the correct policy is; we can only try and see. I believe that this man will be intelligent enough to take the hint, as others have before him. If I am wrong —"

"Yes?"

"Then, obviously, stronger measures will be called for. I repeat that I consider the situation to be potentially a nuisance to us, even a danger. As you know, I do not share the conviction of our time that we are utterly invincible. As was pointed out long ago by our perhaps wiser predecessors, apathy breeds disaster."

The Advisor chuckled. "I don't share your gloomy outlook, Fitz," he said, "but I respect your point of view. Your request is not unreasonable, and I'll back you on it. I suggest we get it over with as soon as possible, and check in at Tracer tonight. I presume you'll want to direct things personally?"

"I'd like to, yes."

The Advisor smiled and pushed back his chair. "Let's go," he said.

The two men stepped into an Arch in Toplanque, Mexico, sat for five minutes in an electric grayness, and emerged in the Tracer Station in Los Angeles, California. The Station was located in a comfortable sub-cellar beneath a walled mansion in Beverly Hills, but would probably have attracted little attention on the surface, California never having been noted for its rigid conformity to standardized ways of living. There were no flashing lights or obscure, mysterious machinery, nor were there black-clad guards prowling about with mur-

der in their eyes. Rather, there was a large, air-conditioned, well-lighted room. Paintings hung on the walls, and several tall people were engaged in watching and listening to a symphony on television in one corner of the room. There was a desk along one wall, and at the desk sat a woman.

"Fitz!" she exclaimed, rising. "So good to see you."

Fitz-James smiled and exchanged pleasantries. Anne was an attractive woman and well-dressed, but she was inclined to be over-talkative and gushy. Fitz-James had never understood why she had been entrusted with even the clerical work of a Tracer Station, but then, he told himself, that was none of his business and, of course, it was the job of all of them to help one another.

"Business or pleasure, Fitz?" she asked, after running at break-neck speed through the biographies of mutual acquaintances. She smiled with what was meant to be coyness, and Fitz-James recalled that Anne was single again.

"Business I'm afraid," he said, "and rather important business at that, Anne. Would you alert the staff, please, and get a crew ready to go back?"

"Of course, Fitz." She began jabbing buttons and opening relays.

Fitz-James nodded and moved across the room with the Advisor.

They passed through a door into a smaller room, and a Tracer technician was waiting for them. He was old and quite gray, but his dark eyes were alert and capable.

"We'll get right on it, gentlemen," the technician said. "If you'll just give us the data, please?"

Fitz-James puffed on his pipe, approving. "We'll just need a small crew, I believe," he said. "Nothing difficult — we'll have to go back two thousand years or so, to Coordinate MDF-604. The clean-up crew that went back to thirty thousand years did very well, but they missed a cog-wheel that later turned up inside a more recent agricultural Indian village. We'll have to go and get it."

The technician thought a moment, then nodded. "I see you understand the technical difficulties involved," he said. "Two thousand years should be safe enough, and cause a minimum of alteration. Anything more recent would be a major operation, and I suppose five years one way or the other won't matter in this case?"

"Not at all."

"Fine, fine. We'll be ready to go in thirty minutes, gentlemen. I wish you a pleasant journey."

One hour later, Fitz-James, the Advisor, and four crewmen stood in the mountains of Mexico, fifty years before the birth of Christ.



"There it is," said Fitz-James, pointing.

Below them and to their right, an Indian village sweltered in the humid sun of high noon. It stood on a terrace overlooking a green plain that sloped to a clean, glistening stream. It was built in five units, each unit consisting of a walled courtyard of stone and mud, rectangular in shape, within each of which were three small boxlike houses. In firepits between the houses, women were cooking in large clay pots. Naked Indian children played on the roof-tops, and in the distance men could be seen working in the maize fields. There were no animals to be seen. A woman's voice chanted softly, far away, and a

hawk slanted on lazy wings across the sultry blue of the sky.

"I really prefer our friends as they are now," the Advisor mused. "So uncluttered and simple, and content to leave the atom alone."

"Don't forget, though," Fitz-James pointed out, "that they weren't supporting us here then — or, rather, now. Our people in America were individualists, independent livers. Quite foolish, of course, and all this land was non-functional from the point of view of the mainstream of our development in Europe. It took us long enough to get Cortes over here, you'll remember."

"Let's get to work, my friends," said the Advisor.

The six of them activated their



screens and began to walk slowly down a mountain trail toward the village. They picked their way with infinite care, and they touched nothing at all. Time travel was a tricky business, Fitz-James reflected, and it always made him feel vaguely uncomfortable. Since he was a man who valued his comfort, he did not relish what he was doing. Even with all their experience and controls, unexpected things happened. So long as they knew for certain exactly what it was they had changed, they could channel and predict it. But if they inadvertently got in the wrong place at the wrong time, or dropped a steel knife . . .

The Indians saw them coming

when they were half-way to the village, and life stopped with an abruptness that was startling. The Indians disappeared as if by magic into their tiny houses and silence was loud in the air. One child still played aimlessly on a hot roof, and a mother materialised out of nowhere and snatched him below. The men in the fields dropped their digging sticks and picked up their bows. Overhead, high in a lazy sky, the hawk still circled on stationary wings.

The tall men did not hesitate. They simply walked into the deserted village, spread out with trained precision, and went to work. Fitz-James, who had kept up with the progress of the ex-

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cavation that was to take place two thousand years later, selected the most likely house structure, bent low to avoid hitting his head, and walked inside.

It was gloomy at first, but he knew that he was not alone. He waited patiently, and in a moment it came. An arrow whistled out of the corner and hit him solidly in the chest. It fell away harmlessly from his protective field, of course, and he laughed softly. There was a second of suspended time, and then three shadows, one large and two small, swished by him and out of the house, as an Indian woman and her two children fled from a monster.

Fitz-James chuckled again, and switched on his light. The little room was quite barren by modern standards, with only a few clay pottery vessels, a bow, and two rude brush mats in evidence on the hard-packed dirt floor. There were two rooms, the inner one being very dark, with a rock-paved floor and stacks of corn and squash. Fitz-James concentrated on the outer room.

With his electronic-analyzer probe, he swept the floor. The instrument blinked repeatedly, and he read off the spectrum with a practiced eye. Pottery, flint, basketry, wood, bone — and there it was. He smiled, ignoring another arrow that whistled in from outside and hit him in the back. Plastic; this was really too easy.

It was no wonder that his people were becoming complacent; he even had to watch himself.

Carefully, Fitz-James took a tiny cutter and drilled his way into the earth floor. He did not have far to go, and quite soon he reached into the hole, picked out the cogged plastic disc, and put it into his pocket. Then he filled in the hole again, smoothed down the dirt, and left. Another arrow hit him in the chest as he walked outside, and he threw it away with a smile.

An Indian confronted him in the courtyard — a small man, nearly naked, with a single feather in his hair and a bow in his hand. Fitz-James walked toward him steadily, glowing slightly from his force field. The Indian stood his ground until the strange thing almost touched him, then he turned and fled from the unknown and the horrible. The village was very quiet.

"I've got it," Fitz-James called out. "Let's go back."

The others emerged from houses, quietly and without fuss, and together they walked back up the trail to where their Tracer waited. When they were half-way to their destination, one of the crewmen took a bit of worked flint out of his shirt pocket and placed it carefully along the trail.

"The Substitution boys decided to kill two birds with one stone," he explained.

Fitz-James glanced at the flint and raised an eyebrow. It was a rather large spear point, beautifully made, fat, and with a distinctive channel groove sliced out of each side. It nestled among the rocks where it had been placed, looking quite natural despite the fact that it had been specially treated to give the proper radio-carbon reading when it was found two thousand years later.

"A Folsom point?" he questioned.

The crewman nodded. "They've decided to extend the complex into Mexico," he said. "Silly, of course, but it ties in with their current theories, and it will keep them from looking for anything else for awhile."

"Substitution knows best, naturally," Fitz-James said.

They walked on to the Tracer and stepped inside. Behind them, Fitz-James knew, the Indians were sneaking back into their village, terror-stricken over something that was beyond their comprehension. There would be whispered conferences and strange chants under the cold full moon. There would be dreams and stories of the giants who had come from the skies. There would be ceremonials and dances, and perhaps labored pictographs scrawled on the smoke-blackened walls of a mountain rock shelter. Weird, unearthly drawings, distorted and unreal, that would one

day be collected and explained blithely away in a thesis that no one would read. . . .

The Tracer hummed, shimmered and vanished.

The hot sun burned in the humid air, and the hawk still circled with utter unconcern on splendid wings.

"I'm terribly sorry you can't stay, Fitz," said the woman at the desk. "We see so little of you these days."

"I am sorry, Anne. But I really must get back to the ranch. You must come and visit me soon."

Fitz-James turned away and shook hands with the Advisor. "Good of you to help out," he said. "I'll keep you posted on any new developments."

"Not at all," the Advisor said. "Feel free to call on me at any time."

Thomas Fitz-James waved to his friends around the room, patted the plastic disc in his pocket, set the controls, and stepped into an Arch. Five minutes later he was home in Mexico. He locked the disc in his safe, turned out all the lights, and went to bed to sleep the dreamless sleep of the well-content. The crisis was past.

At that very moment, a few miles away, Bill Shackelford lay restlessly awake in his tent, smoking a cigarette, with an empty box under his cot.

When Bill Shackelford awakened, he still had his memory intact and unaltered. It had once been assumed, by those concerned with such speculative mental exercise, that the effects of time travel, however confusing and paradoxical, would be essentially direct-line cause-and-effect relationships. Either something happened one way or it happened another, it being obviously impossible for, say, the United States to both exist and not exist at the same time and in the same dimension. Following this either-or line of reasoning, the theorists were much interested in the concept of alternate patterns of development, and it was asserted that it was possible, granting the existence of time travel, to go back into the past in order to radically change the present.

However logical and comfortable this idea may have been — and even accurate to some extent — it offered a source of considerable amusement to those who had empirical experience in working in the time stream. Reality, with a characteristically stubborn disregard for logic, failed to conform. Time travel turned out to be far more tricky and subtle than it had seemed to the earlier experimenters. After three hundred years of work, the future remained a blank — utterly inac-

cessible. All peoples, whatever their differences, were of necessity time travellers, moving ever forward into the future. This proceeded at a constant rate, evidently, and could not be altered. In a very real sense, the future did not yet exist at any given time, and therefore one could not venture into it.

The past *did* exist — *and so did the present*. The really vital point was that the so-called present was actually little more than a concept; it came and went with such rapidity that it could not be pinned down. It was not static, but ever-changing. It was a tiny, chaotic bubble of activity, rushed along into the future at the very tips of rigid, telescoping pencils of past development. It was fluid in the bubble, but it solidified instantly in the fractional part of a microsecond required for the present to turn into the past.

Change took place, from moment to moment, in the swirling bubble; the bubble, however, was still there at the end of its developmental column, right where it "had" been. In other words, in its practical aspects, if a man picked up a rock in that portion of past time designated as "yesterday," then he *did* have the rock yesterday, and it was "there." If another man in the bubble of the present went back to what might be described as the day *before* yesterday and removed the rock,

a logical paradox resulted. There was after all, only the one rock — and it couldn't be in two different places at the same time.

Working through laws almost unimaginably complex and inflexible, nature came up with quite a simple, workable resolution of the paradox. There was only one place in which change could occur, and that was in the fluid bubble of the rushing present. Therefore, inexorably, that was where the change *did* occur. In the instant of the total present, the rock changed locations. Its original owner no longer had it; it simply was not in his possession, because it was somewhere else. However, his finding of the rock on the previous day had been a "real" experience — he *had* found it, and he *had* picked it up. Yesterday, it had been "there." Today, it was elsewhere. He of course remembered having the rock — he *knew* he had it.

Just the same, the rock had changed hands in the present. It could not with accuracy be termed a simple game, but it was not a game without rules. The rules were complex and difficult, but they worked.

There was nothing mysterious about it. It was all quite "natural" and understandable. The game could be played and won —

If you knew the rules . . .

Bill Shackelford knew only

that the plastic disc had vanished.

He was no fool. In any case, he told himself, it took no genius to figure out what had happened. The disc had been in the box under his cot the night before, because he had put it there. It was not there now. Therefore, someone had taken it.

None of the students would have taken the disc, of course, and only one other person knew about it. Astonishing and unreasonable as it seemed, Thomas Fitz-James was the only person who could possibly have stolen the plastic disc. It didn't make sense, but there it was.

That huge, dignified man had crept into their tent in the dead of night and taken something that was utterly worthless. Shackelford tried to imagine it, to bring the scene to life, and failed. That giant slipping through the pines in the blackness under the stars, crouching to come through the tent flap, hovering over him as he slept like a monstrous shadow, reaching down under his cot with that great, strong hand . . .

Shackelford looked over at his wife. Her face was relaxed and very young as she slept, and her short brown hair curled in soft spirals on her pillow. The sun was spilling in through the tent flap, splashing warmly up on the green of her sleeping bag, and she was beginning to stir restlessly. And

in the night, not a yard from her, had stood —

Bill Shackelford shuddered. There was just no explanation for such a thing, but it had happened. Why?

He was sure of one thing, surer than he had ever been of anything in his life; if he were smart, he would forget that he had ever seen or heard of that little disc that looked like a gear. It wasn't really important to him, and it had led him into a situation for which there was no precedent at all. He had been given a strong hint, and any reasonable man would have to take it. What did it matter to him? He would simply push the disc out of his mind, go on with his work, and pretend that nothing had happened. That was the only possible course.

It would be quite easy and certainly intelligent, and he knew instantly that he wasn't going to do it.

Bill Shackelford walked across the little tent and sat down on his wife's cot. He took her face in his hands and kissed her lightly on the nose.

"Wake up, hon," he said quietly. "I need some help."

Two weeks later, just as the gray of evening was darkening into night, two horses picked their way down a faint trail out of the hills. They sniffed and snorted, sensing the nearness of home, and

their riders held them back with difficulty. The air was crisp with the chill of night, and a swollen silver moon was already growing amorphaously out of the dark crown of the hills. It was a peaceful scene, almost idyllic, like something out of a travel folder. But the man's free hand kept straying to the cold handle of a .38 revolver at his side, and the woman was breathing hard and fast and shallow.

"There it is," said Bill Shackelford quietly, shifting his weight in the saddle.

Ahead of them, and below them on the valley floor, the ranch buildings were little pin-points of light in the shadows. They looked like stars that had fallen to earth, there to twinkle warmly with sublime disregard for the laws of the universe. A faint hum drifted up to them from where several hands worked late in the little saw mill. There was nothing at all sinister about the ranch, and Shackelford wondered why his hand was trembling as he rode.

They went on at a steady pace, not talking now, and neither making themselves conspicuous nor being unduly secretive. There was, after all, no law against riding across their host's ranch in the evening, and if they were seen they had merely to murmur a polite *buenas noches, amigo*, and pass on. The whole affair, as a matter of fact, struck Shackelford

as a little unreal, a trifle artificial. He was not a melodramatic man by inclination, and he was thoroughly aware of how illogical his actions would have seemed to an impartial observer. He could hear himself explaining lamely, "Well, the guy gives me the creeps, and anyhow I had a plastic disc that has disappeared."

He forced himself to relax, letting the horse follow his own lead down the familiar trail. There was more to it than just the disc, he knew, and more to it than a feeling of dislike for Fitz-James that he had felt from the beginning. He was dealing with intangibles, perhaps even being quite irrational in his actions, and yet what he was doing was inevitable, for him. Every man's actions are bound up inexorably with what he is, and Bill Shackelford had all his life been driven by two impulses: he didn't like to be a pawn in a game he didn't understand, and when a question kicked him in the face he kept going until he found an answer that satisfied him.

He remembered, riding along in the moonlight with his wife at his side, another, younger Bill Shackelford, sitting in a classroom on a sleepy spring day. . . .

"It's really rather curious about the various Early Man points in the New World," the lecturer was saying. "Ordinarily, you'd expect

the earliest stone industry products to be the crudest, with the artifacts becoming more efficient and better made as subsequent improvements in technique were learned. In the Sandia points, this is more or less the situation; they wouldn't be of much interest if it were not for their great antiquity. But look at the other Early Man points! The later Eden points are beautiful things, certainly, and the Clovis fluteds are well-made artifacts, but your Folsom points really take the cake. There they are, almost the oldest known spear points in America, and better made than any that have ever been manufactured since! It isn't much of a trick to chip out a crude projectile point once you know how, but try to make a fluted Folsom some time when you've got nothing to do for a year or two. It's really remarkable, although, of course, there's nothing really startling about it. Undoubtedly, they had a long developmental period behind them in Asia or somewhere. . . ."

"Pardon me, sir," Bill Shackelford interrupted, "but how do you KNOW?"

"Even in science we have to take some things for granted, Bill," the professor said. "Perhaps we don't actually know for certain . . ."

"No," Shackelford had said to himself, "we don't really know."

Outside, the spring winds were soft and warm, and birds sang in the trees.

They left the horses outside the corral and walked through the night to the main ranch house. There were actually four houses on the ranch that were for the personal use of the Fitz-James clan — one for him and one for each of his three children, in case they should drop in some year for tea. There was yet another — a cozy, L-shaped affair — for the foreman, and a number of small but well-built cottages for the hands. It all added up to a picture that was not exactly the epitome of roughing it on the frontier, Shackelford reflected.

There were a lot of lights on in the main ranch house, and they could hear voices and the tinkle of glasses from within. There seemed to be a perpetual party going on at the ranch, which was a required stopover for all visiting dignitaries from Mexico City and elsewhere, so this was not in itself surprising.

Shackelford took Dawn's hand as they walked, and found it to be steadier than his own. He still was uncertain as to what he intended to do now that he was here, but he was prepared to let events take their course. The two of them walked quietly along down the dirt road, still making no attempt at concealment, but not attracting attention. They reached the side of the house without incident and stopped.

"Little man," Dawn whispered,

"what now? If I may ask you!"

"I'd like to take a look in through the window, if you're game."

"I'm with you, Willie — but I feel like a fool."

His heart hammering against his ribs with what seemed thunderous intensity, Shackelford inched along the wall until he was under one of the big double windows. He wiped the sweat off his hands on his jeans, held his breath, and looked in. Instantly, he stiffened, and ducked his head.

A strange new cold stabbed with icy silence through the night.

"Take a look, Dawn," he whispered, "and then tell me who's a fool."

They looked together.

Inside the huge living room were three couples, including Fitz-James and a woman that Shackelford had never seen before. The men were all enormous, although Fitz-James was the biggest one there. The women were smaller, but still very tall for females. They stood on the thick white rugs, their glasses in their hands, talking and laughing in quiet, dignified tones.

Fitz-James had the plastic disc in his hand and they were all looking at it, smiling, sharing some secret joke. One of them turned toward the window, idly, and Shackelford and Dawn dropped back down out of sight.

They looked at each other in the shadow from the wall. Neither spoke, but they stood close together and both of them felt the same thing. An unbelief, a horror. An iron fist that smashed at the brain. An icy centipede that walked with a million frozen feet up and down your spine . . .

Quite suddenly, the night was alien around them. Their world, their civilization, their neat little value system that had everything in its proper place — all gone, extinguished, clicked out like a false light that had never burned. Instead — the Unknown. Two little mammals, tiny and afraid, peering in out of the night. Two little mammals peering in at — what?

Bill Shackelford clenched his fists as a sea of conflicts tossed within him. The sheer, unassuming familiarity of what was inside the room, a foot from his head, gave the greatest shock of all, he knew. If he had looked into a room and seen something totally alien, that would have been difficult enough to take. But to look into it and see an *almost* normal scene, subtly distorted in only one dimension —

His breath scraped out of his throat in a shallow gasp and he realized that he had been holding his breath. Almost instinctively, he put his arm around his woman. As the first shock of nonrecognition passed, a slow burning anger

coursed through him. He felt cheated, tricked. He felt as though someone he had known all his life had suddenly dealt him a stacked hand in poker, or had inexplicably slapped him in the face.

He had been cut down in size, literally and figuratively, and he didn't like it. And he felt somehow — cautiously, uncertainly — that something important was at stake here tonight under the Mexican stars, something far more significant than a little plastic disc or his own non-understanding. . . .

He took a deep breath. "Dawn," he whispered, "I'm going to go in there and take it away from them."

She held on to him, knowing him, loving him, fearful for him. "It's not worth it, Bill," she whispered. "Nothing's worth your getting killed, nothing, certainly not that little thing. Let's go away from here, think it over, make plans —"

He looked at her in the darkness. "I can't," he said. "You know I can't."

She did know it, and she accepted it. "How?" she asked quietly.

He smiled, somehow feeling better now that the decision had been taken. "Nothing very heroic, hon," he said, as they inched away from the open window. "I value my hide as much as the

next man. There's no reason why we shouldn't be here tonight — we're guests, not trespassers. I think I'll just drop in and pay a little social call."

Dawn nodded — small and very young in the darkness, and yet filling the night with a dimension beyond mere physical size. "I'm going with you, Bill," she said.

Shackelford pressed her hand. "Let's go," he said.

He knocked on the ranch house door, loudly, using the brass knocker. There was a sudden silence, a short pause. The night collected itself and stood still.

The door opened.

"Hello, Mr. Fitz-James," Shackelford said pleasantly. "We were out riding and just happened to drop by."

Thomas Fitz-James — big, gray-haired, charming — smiled his best smile. "So good to see you both," he said. "Won't you come in?"

They entered the ranch house, passed through the mirrored entrance hall, and walked into the huge living room. The three women were still in it, seated in great, upholstered chairs, their silken feet crossed gracefully on the thick white rugs. In the vastness of the room, they seemed quite normal in size. The men were nowhere to be seen.

Fitz-James made the necessary

introductions easily and without strain, without offering any explanation of the women's presence. He seemed thoroughly at his ease, insisted on mixing a drink for Shackelford and his wife, and filled his pipe with a precise care that indicated that he had no other problem in the world.

"Well," said Fitz-James heartily, lighting his pipe and blowing blue smoke gently at the ceiling, "is this purely a social call, or can I do something for you?"

Shackelford sipped his wine, determined that if this were to be a play he would not fluff his lines. "As a matter of fact," he said evenly, "I believe that you can be of some assistance to me."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You recall that small disc I told you about several weeks ago, the one that we found in the dig?"

"Why, yes, I seem to —"

"It's all very strange," Shackelford rushed on, ignoring the unfamiliar heart that thumped and pounded in his chest, "but that disc was lost shortly after I told you about it."

No one moved, no one did anything — but the room was different.

"A shame, a shame," said Fitz-James, shaking his head. "I hope that it has turned up again?"

"In a manner of speaking," Shackelford said, "it has." He paused, and the thought flashed

through his mind that this scene was supernally long and tiring and that it would never end. "One of your hands was in camp yesterday and told me that he had found it on the road and had turned it in to you. He had heard some of the students talking about it, and he suggested that perhaps you had forgotten about it."

If you hadn't been watching for it, you would never have detected the fraction of a pause before Fitz-James reacted. Then he snapped his fingers, his face lit up in a beaming smile, and he said: "Of course! How stupid of me. It was turned in to me, but it didn't seem important and it slipped my mind. I have so many things to keep track of, of course —"

"Of course," said Shackelford.

Fitz-James looked him in the eye, and his smile went no further than his mouth. "Do you want it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Shackelford, without hesitation. "Yes, I'd like to have it."

Fitz-James nodded, his eyes black. "I'll get it for you," he said, and walked out of the room.

Shackelford stood there and waited, with Dawn at his side. He did his level best to look nonchalant, but he knew he was failing miserably. The best he could manage was a sort of vacant smile on his face as he looked at

the women in the room, and he sensed that Dawn was amused, despite her tenseness. He stood there, feeling very odd, and he kept thinking: a little insectivore sitting in his nest, trying hard not to notice the smiling, charming dinosaurs that ring him in. . . .

"Here it is," said Fitz-James, handing Shackelford the little cogged disc that had travelled further than Shackelford knew. "Sorry I forgot about it."

"Quite all right," Shackelford assured him.

"And by the way," Fitz-James said, puffing slowly on his pipe, "what was the name of the man who reminded you of it? I've quite forgotten, and I really should reward him."

"Funny," Shackelford said, meeting his gaze squarely. "I've forgotten too."

Fitz-James didn't press the point — he even seemed faintly amused, and that was far worse than his laughter. Shackelford and Dawn finished their wine and excused themselves, anxious to get out, get away.

"So happy you dropped in," Fitz-James said with genteel heartiness. He shook hands, his great fingers closing like a steel vice around Shackelford's palm. Shackelford kept his face expressionless. "I'll see you again soon," Fitz-James promised with evident sincerity.

"I'll be looking forward to it,"

Shackelford said, and they left.

The night was cold and clean and dusted with crystal stars. They walked back to their horses, trying not to run, mounted and started down the dark trail for camp. The plastic disc was secure in Shackelford's hand, but his mind was less certain. He was two people. One sat in the saddle and felt the wind in his face, and the other watched sadly from a subconscious Somewhere. Watched the two horses stream over the earth in an easy gallop, watched the world that crouched around them. Watched the man and his wife, afraid in the night. Watched and asked: *What have you done?*

IV

It was the end of summer, a time of brief hiatus between research and the beginning of another autumnal grind. It was a time for relaxing a little, a time for seeing old friends, a time for going down to the bar and cussing the fact that you never had time to go fishing anymore. It was a time for going home. But Bill Shackelford was a long way from Illinois.

He walked rapidly across the almost deserted campus of the University of Texas in Austin, feeling the hot sun beat down on his back and trying not to think, for a moment, about the tiny plastic disc that had so altered his life.

He looked at the Main Building as he passed by, and it amused him as always, with its little Greek temple perched as though in perpetual surprise high atop a towering skyscraper that in turn erupted violently out of a broad, rectangular conglomeration of fused classic and Spanish architectural disharmonies. Old B Hall squatted like an antiquarian collector's item in the midst of modern university buildings, and two caretakers were engaged hopefully in trying to make flowers bloom between sterile cement walks. It was a pleasant place, Bill thought — and life was pleasant too, if he would just let it alone. He wondered, not for the first time, what it was that drove him on, and had driven him all his life. Science? Curiosity? Responsibility? A warped sense of fun?

Or was it fear?

He walked into Waggoner Hall, decided against the elevator which probably wasn't working anyway, and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. He pushed through the double doors, passed along a wary line of desks belonging to Business Administration secretaries, and walked into the Anthropology Museum. Maria was there, and he lingered a minute or two longer than necessary, confirming his opinion that a really good-looking secretary never harmed any department.

He passed through the empty museum, hardly glancing at the familiar exhibits. Campbell and Krieger were both working with Joe Cason down at Falcon, so the museum was even quieter than usual. He came to the closed door at the end of the room, a door without markings on it of any sort, and knocked.

"If it's Shackelford, go away," a voice ordered.

Shackelford grinned and pushed open the door. He walked into the strange little office and there was Frank Johnston, glowering with sleepy malevolence from an ancient black leather couch.

"So it's you, hey."

"It's me, Frank."

Frank Johnston was as unusual as his office, which was a packed, untidy, wonderful hodge-podge of books, smelly pipes, magazines, weird statuettes and flint artifacts, pin-up calendars, and eccentric stuffiness. He was a short, bulky man, somewhere between fifty and eighty years old, with a shiny bald head, drooping bandit's moustache, and piercing green eyes that were partially shielded by a bent and beribboned pair of rimless spectacles. He was what was popularly known as a character, and he was also just about the best, if the most unorthodox, research archeologist in America.

"Got your letter," the great man said, without getting up from

his couch. "Very dull. Sit down. What'd you find, an ancient uranium mine, living proof that Atlantis was under the Rio Grande? How's your wife?"

Shackelford sat down in the swivel chair behind the desk, which squeaked with the surprise of long disuse. "I don't know what I found, Frank," he said slowly. "I thought maybe you could tell me."

Johnston's bushy gray eyebrows lifted a good inch and a half. "Thought you young fellows knew everything. Had to come to the old man, hey?"

Shackelford nodded. "I've about decided I don't know anything," he admitted. "We did find a Folsom point down there, the first one from Mexico, but I don't think that's very important now."

"Out for bigger game, eh?" the old man said cynically.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

Bill Shackelford took the clogged plastic disc out of his pocket and handed it to Johnston. Johnston took it, adjusted his glasses, stared at it, and then slowly sat up on the couch. The smile was gone from his face. He breathed heavily, and a chill settled cautiously in the stuffy room.

"What do you want, Bill?" the old man said. "Where did you get this? *What do you want?*"

Shackelford was somewhat taken aback by the intensity of Johnston's response, but he felt a sudden reassurance in it. He had gambled, and he had won.

"You do know what it is, then," he stated.

Johnston heaved himself to his feet, wheezed, and made a long ceremony out of lighting his pipe with a singularly foul brand of tobacco concocted from some Indian formula. He didn't answer for a long minute, his sharp eyes flickering from the innocuous little disc to Shackelford and back again. He sat down again, his face very pale in contrast to its usual ruddiness.

"I'm afraid to answer that question, Bill," he said. "I'm being honest with you, and I'll give you some advice: throw that thing away, forget about it, get into another profession, and enjoy your life while you can."

Bill stared at the man. Was this Frank Johnston talking, the man who had such a contempt for authority that he had once shot a blunt arrow at the chairman of the department, and thrown a graduate student out of a first floor window? "I don't understand, Frank," he said. "After all . . ."

"After all nothing," the old man snorted. "I know you don't understand, and I say that's good. Don't try to. Go away."

Shackelford looked at him, feel-

ing the cold sweat in his palms as they gripped his chair. "I can't do that, Frank," he said, "and you know it. I've come to you as a friend, not as an archeologist. I need help, and whether I get it or not I'm getting to the root of this thing. There's more to it than just the disc, you see."

"Ummm," said the man behind the pipe. "Gone that far, hey?"

"Yes," said Shackelford, and told him the whole story of what had happened in Mexico. He wondered briefly at Johnston's devil's grin at the account of the disappearance and recovery of the disc, but hurried through his story to the end, including the impossible giants that frequented the Fitz-James ranch. "There's a game going on, Frank," he concluded, "and I don't know the score. I don't even know who's playing. I think you do."

"Hmf," observed Frank Johnston, filling the room with rank blue smoke. "Maybe you're making more of all this than necessary, Bill."

"How, dammit? If you can explain —"

"Look at it this way, Bill. You found an intrusive plastic disc in an Indian village site, and it was filched by the man who owned the property the site was on. Maybe he collects discs, maybe he's psycho, you see? Funny

things happen sometimes. Okay, so you go to see him and find tall people in his living room. To borrow a pet phrase of another member of this department, so what? If you were that tall, wouldn't you want to associate with people on the same scale?" He eyed Shackelford narrowly. "Wouldn't you? What's so upsetting about all that? That's my explanation, and I'd say you've gotten yourself all worked up over nothing, d'you see?"

Shackelford fished out a cigarette, lit it, and added more smoke to the little room. "Frank," he said slowly, "do you believe that?"

Frank Johnston snorted. "Rubbish. Of course not."

"Then what *do* you believe? I'm a big boy now; I want to play."

"I warn you: you won't like this game. You won't like it at all."

"I'm going to play, Frank. I might as well know the rules."

Frank Johnston sighed. "I suppose so," he said. "You're a fool, of course, Bill, but I'm proud of you, if that means anything at all."

Shackelford waited.

Frank Johnston leaned forward on the old black couch, his bandit's moustache quivering indignantly. "What would you do, Bill," he asked, "if I told you that we of this earth are not our

own masters, and never have been?"

Bill Shackelford sat back, the cigarette forgotten in his hands. His throat was very dry. To suspect something, to have a vague indication, was bad enough. But this bland question . . .

"I don't know," he replied slowly. "You'd have to amplify it some. First: what, precisely, are you saying?"

"Do you have trouble with the English language?"

"I mean, is this the sort of thing Charles Fort talked about —"

Johnston slammed his big fist down on the couch, making a thump and a puff of dust. "Don't be an ass."

"Well, do you mean that Somebody — or Something — has taken over the Earth and is running it as a sideshow? People from space, maybe, or little green men?"

Johnston puffed an explosion of blue smoke. "Bah," he said fervently. "Junk and balderdash. Use your head, man."

"I'm trying to," Shackelford said, and meant it. The cigarette burned his fingers and he ground it out in a marine shell on the desk. "I need some facts. . . ."

"You've got facts, son. Facts are nothing — you have to use them, d'you see? You come waltzing in here with a story about giants and then you talk about little green men. The first step,

d'you see, is to treat the data with some respect. At the very least you should postulate *big green men*."

Shackelford watched him for a smile that wasn't forthcoming. "It's a little hard to do," he said, lighting another cigarette. "Somehow, when you talk about giants — even when you see them with your own eyes — you can't treat them seriously. They're something out of fairyland, out of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, out of corny movies and screwy fiction. . . ."

Johnston impaled him with his pipe. "Exactly," he said. "Exactly. And go on from there, son. The big question, the one that never gets asked in science nowadays, is: *why?* Why can't you take them seriously? Who or what has conditioned you so that you can't even carry out a logical inquiry about a so-called giant? This is important, and I suggest you think about it."

Shackelford thought about it, his mind in a turmoil. He remembered once during the war, when he had been on leave in Cincinnati, he had gotten on a bus and sat down right next to a man who was an exact double for Adolf Hitler, complete to the last hair on his moustache and the straight black hair on the forehead. They had smiled at each other, and he had paid the man no further attention. Impossible, of course —

but what if the man *had* been Hitler?

"There's even some evidence in what we loftily refer to as respectable scientific annals," Johnston continued evenly, "and you might also reflect a moment on what is considered respectable science, and *why*. The study of evolution has shown that a tendency toward size increase is readily discernible. Take our own species, for example. That little insectivore that started things off was a couple of inches long, and here we sit. And the gorilla is bigger than we are, you know. There's nothing fantastic about it at all — we're giants, you and I, in the animal kingdom, and what's another twelve inches?"

Shackelford waited, listening. When Johnston talked, you forgot all about his gnomelike personality; you knew you were in contact with a mind.

"To be more specific, I presume you've read Weidenreich?"

"Well, he wrote a lot —"

"Nonsense. I mean *the* Weidenreich — the monograph, *Giant Early Man from Java and South China*, and the book, *Apes, Giants, and Man*. Here, by heaven, we have the best physical anthropologist who ever lived, and he tells about the teeth of *Gigantopithecus blacki* — three humanoid teeth from the early Pleistocene, and teeth with a mass six times larger than modern man's,

and three times as big as those of any anthropoid or fossil man. "You've read it?"

"Well, yes —"

"Bah. They've *all* read it, and what's the difference? They know Weidenreich was the best there was, they know he's got all the evidence he needs, but it doesn't fit the current dogma and so it never even gets mentioned anymore. That's science for you, my boy, and don't you ever forget it."

Shackelford waited a minute, thinking. The chill in the room deepened. "Then you think —"

"Of course. Do you have to have it announced by the government before you believe it? The masters of this planet are not men as we usually think of them. They are not like us, any more than Neanderthals were like us. They're alien all right — but they don't come from a planet called Blotz out near Capella. They come from right here on Earth, my friend, and they've been here as long as we have."

Shackelford sat there in the little room, his cigarette in his hand, and he thought: Man, proud man, strutting and preening on his little stage — an idiot ape, not seeing the bars, not seeing the cage. . . .

"But what are you saying?" he demanded, knowing as he said it that he was only trying to reassure himself, reorient himself,

get rid of the facts by tossing them out the door. "How can you possibly know all this? Where's the evidence?"

Frank Johnston laughed shortly. He gestured at the crumpled newspaper lying on his desk, with its big black headlines and its homey philosophies. "That," he said, "is a newspaper. I suggest that you read one sometime."

"You know more about all this than you're telling, I imagine."

"I've told more than I should know, my boy, let's put it that way. And I should know better than to tell as much as I have. I'm not going to draw you any pictures, Bill. I've given you a few hints, but you'll have to take them from there. You'll have to come to your own conclusions, and then make your own decisions, just as I have had to do." He smiled wryly. "I predict you'll have some help."

"What do you mean by that?"

Frank Johnston puffed on his pipe and said nothing.

"And how about that plastic disc? What does it mean? Why was it stolen from me?" Shackelford was on his feet now, angry, bewildered. Who did Johnston think he was, anyhow, to grant or hold back information like a little tin god?

"Take it easy, son," the old man said, not unkindly. "You'll find these things out soon enough, if you don't already know them."

"Already know them? I don't know anything. If there's some sort of a conspiracy — if we're just pawns in some cosmic chess game — if all this is true — then why don't we do something about it?" Shackelford clenched his fists. "We can't just sit by and be treated like cattle. We're men, we can *do* something, anything!"

Frank Johnston smiled wryly. "What?" he asked. "Perhaps we could phone it in to the Associated Press as a scoop, hey?"

Shackelford hesitated. He had so little to go on, so little data — what could he possibly do with it? He tried to calm down, to think. He told himself that his little discovery hadn't upset the universe, after all — everything was just as it had been before. . . .

"I've said too much," Frank Johnston told him, heaving himself to his feet and adjusting his spectacles. "I won't say anything else, and of course I'll deny saying anything at all if you repeat any of this. You've got some big decisions to make, boy, and I suggest you make them before you go any further. It's a little easier to cross the ocean if you stop long enough to get on a boat first, instead of trying to make one as you swim along."

Shackelford picked up the little plastic disc and put it back in his pocket. "I'll see you again," he said.

"I'll deny everything I've said,

Bill," the old man said slowly. "I can't help you any further, and you'd be wasting your time to come back to me. You'll have to go your own way, as I went mine. You'll understand, before you're through. Just use your head, boy, just use your head."

Shackelford turned to go, more confused than ever.

"By the way, Bill," asked Frank Johnston, "how tall are you?"

Shackelford whirled and stared at the little man who stood behind him smoking his smelly pipe. He stared at him in blank consternation, tried to speak, and couldn't.

Shaking and afraid, he left the room.

Bill Shackelford walked across the campus and tried to tell himself that it didn't matter. It was evening now, and the long, soft shadows were creeping along the still sun-warm cement walks. An easy, refreshing breeze whispered out of the north. What difference did it make whether man controlled his own destiny or not? The knowledge that he was only a passenger on the train, and not the engineer, didn't really change anything. He was still where he was, with a life to live and a chance for happiness. Nothing has changed, he told himself, screamed at himself. It's all just like it was before.

But he couldn't fool himself.
Something *had* changed.

V

Bill Shackelford blinked sleepily when the alarm exploded, and fumbled over with his right hand and depressed the stud. The buzzing came to a merciful halt and he sat up and stretched. These eight o'clock classes were hell on wheels, he thought, but they were the traditional initiation rites for the new instructors.

"Wake up, hon," he mumbled, still half-asleep himself. There was no answer and he looked over at the other bed.

Dawn wasn't there.

He was startled for a moment, then decided that she must have gotten up early to fix breakfast. He hauled himself out of bed and into the shower, shaved and dressed, purposely selecting the loudest tie he owned in order to show the class that he was relatively human despite the fact that he taught college. He lit a cigarette, reminding himself again as he did so that he was smoking too much, and walked down through the hall of their small house, passed through the cubbyhole that the real estate man had proudly assured them was a dining room, and entered the kitchen with a wisecrack on his lips.

The remark died before it was spoken. Dawn wasn't there, ei-

ther, and the kitchen was cold and sterile.

"Dawn," he called, a tight little knot of ice forming in the pit of his stomach.

No answer. The house pressed in around him, and it felt empty. He knew it was empty. There is nothing a man can sense more intuitively than an empty house, and he knew that his senses weren't playing tricks on him.

Slowly, holding himself in check, he went back to the bedroom and looked at her bed. It hadn't been slept in — but she had gone to bed there last night. He looked in the closet, not knowing what he was looking for. Her clothes were still there, including the green print dress she had worn yesterday. He remembered that she had placed it on the chair in the bedroom when she had gone to bed. . . .

"Dawn," he said flatly, not even knowing that he spoke aloud. "Dawn."

She was gone, and he knew he would never see her again. Irrationally, he thought of the little plastic disc. The disc that he had placed in a box under his cot in Mexico, the disc that had vanished. . . .

He sat down on the bed. He could phone the police, of course. He could report his wife as missing. He tried to think, and couldn't. His memory of the last two weeks was curiously blurred. He remem-

bered the meeting with Johnston in Texas quite clearly, and after that — well, he remembered and he didn't remember. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Dawn had been with him last night, he was sure of that, of course. But details escaped him. What had they done? He couldn't quite remember. . . .

He decided not to phone the police, not yet. He refused to break down. He forced his mind into other channels. He made himself do routine things. He walked back to the kitchen, heated some water, made himself a cup of instant coffee, and drank it all. He had already finished it before he remembered that he liked cream and sugar in it.

It wouldn't do to stop and think. He had to keep doing something. He walked through the silent living room and went outside, locking the door behind him. He looked back and shuddered.

The house was so quiet.

He opened the garage. His blue Chevrolet was still there. He got inside, backed the car out, and drove down the street toward the university, hardly seeing where he was going. Dawn's perfume was still in the car, but it faded even as he drove.

His fists were tight on the steering wheel and it was hard for him to see. No sound escaped him, but he knew that he was crying.

"Dawn," he said again — and that was all.

When he walked into his office, Don Ransom was already there.

"Bill," he said, rising in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Shackelford stared at him and tried to smile. "I work here," he said. "Remember?"

"Of course. But —"

"But what?" Shackelford walked over to the fellow anthropologist with whom he shared his office. He touched him, and inwardly cursed his shaking hand. "I do work here, don't I, Don? I know this sounds nuts, but I'm so mixed up. . . ."

Don Ransom placed him carefully in a chair, then closed and locked the door. He winked and extracted a pint of Scotch from the bottom drawer in his desk. He unscrewed the cap and handed it to Shackelford.

"Old tribal custom," he explained. "I think you need this."

Shackelford accepted the bottle gratefully and took a long drink. The Scotch slipped down to his empty stomach like warm oil, and diffused a glow of warmth through him. He felt a little better.

"Look, Don," he said slowly, "what's happened? Just pretend I'm suffering from shock or something, and give me the lowdown. Why shouldn't I have come to

my own office this morning?"

Don Ransom looked at him, frowned, and chewed his lower lip. "You're pretty wrought up, Bill," he said. "Are you sure you don't want to go over to the health service for a checkup, or take a room somewhere for awhile?"

"I'm sure," Shackelford said, closing his eyes. "I'm okay, Don."

"Well," Ransom began, and paused. He swallowed hard, and then began to speak in a low, methodical voice. "Since your wife died in Mexico, you've been pretty upset, naturally. Nobody's seen much of you for the last couple of weeks, and of course we told you that you could forget about teaching until you wanted to come back. I was going to handle your classes. . . ."

"That's enough," Shackelford said, opening his eyes. He began to feel very sick. "Dawn's dead, then?"

"Old man, you'd really better let me run you down to the doctor — you've had a rough time."

Shackelford shook his head. "I'm okay now, Don," he said. "I just wanted to hear you say it. It — it takes a little getting used to."

There was a long, awkward pause, and Shackelford realized that he had put his friend into a thoroughly uncomfortable position. "What am I down for this

semester?" he asked, keeping his voice carefully matter-of-fact.

"Well, you've got Anthro 1, two sections, and Anthro 2. They all meet today. Tomorrow, you've got Archeology of North America. As I said, it's no trouble for me to carry on with them for a while until you get to feeling better. . . ."

"I feel great," Shackelford said, with a wry smile. "Never better. Today's the first day of classes, I take it?"

"Yes."

"I won't need to prepare anything, then. Just walk in and give them the old pep talk, and tell them that if they're interested in dinosaurs they're in the wrong room, hmmm?"

"Sure, Bill. But do you really think —"

"I think I'd better, Don, or I'll wind up in a ward somewhere. Thanks a lot for everything, and I'll explain it all to you one of these years."

He went down to the men's room and was violently sick. Then he combed his hair neatly, took a drink of water, and walked into the classroom to begin another semester.

Coming home that night to an empty house was the toughest part of all, and it took him two hours to do it. But when he got there, the house wasn't empty.

Thomas Fitz-James was there

waiting for him, deep in a chair.

"Good evening," the huge man said, putting aside the book he had been glancing through and rising courteously to his feet, for all the world as though their positions had been reversed and this was his own house. "I've been thumbing over several of your books and find them quite amusing. Absurd, of course, but amusing."

Shackelford found himself taking the situation in his stride; nothing, he told himself, would ever surprise him again. "I'm happy that you find our little efforts entertaining," he said wryly. "We strive to please." Even as he spoke, he thought: thus quickly do our value systems, the principles around which we build our lives, readapt themselves to the Unknown.

"Your liquor is really first rate," Fitz-James commented, raising his glass in a toast. "Won't you join me?"

Shackelford would and did. He poured himself a shot of straight Kentucky bourbon, dropped in a few ice cubes, and sat down in the chair facing Fitz-James. How often, he wondered, had he and Dawn sat across from each other in the evening, sharing a drink. . . .

"Well," he said, "what brings you here? Come back for your little disc?"

Fitz-James laughed heartily,

completely at his ease. "No, Bill," he said, lighting up his pipe. "I came here because I believe you are an intelligent man."

"Well, thanks," said Shackelford. "Do I get a gold star in my hymn book?"

Fitz-James shook his head reprovingly. "Come now," he suggested, "you have every reason to be bitter, Bill, but I'm sure that you realize that that sort of talk will get you nowhere."

Shackelford sipped his drink, amazed at his own coolness. He leaned forward. "Can you bring her back?" he asked evenly. "Can you?"

"No, Bill."

Shackelford drained his drink and poured himself another. "Have your say, then," he said, "and then get out."

Fitz-James shook his head, his gray hair silver under the lamp light. The man dwarfed the chair he sat in, but he was so perfectly proportioned that you felt your eyes were simply playing tricks on you. "Don't be difficult, Bill," he said. "I've come here at considerable inconvenience to tell you a story. You know enough now so that I need waste no time in convincing you of its truth, and I think you ought to hear it."

"Why?"

"It will save you a great deal of wasted effort, for one thing. It will save us a great deal of work, for another. Also, I rather

like you. Why play on the losing team, Bill?"

Shackelford stared at the man. The starkly incredible part of it all, he realized suddenly, was that Fitz-James wasn't kidding. It actually seemed quite logical to the giant that he should murder a man's wife and then drop in for a sociable chat. Shackelford repressed a shudder.

"Say what you have to say," he said.

Thomas Fitz-James leaned forward, smiling. "It's rather a long story," he apologized, "but I'm sure that it is one that you, as an anthropologist, will find interesting." He puffed slowly on his pipe, watching the blue smoke curl upward through the light. "It all began a long, long time ago . . ."

In the very dawn of Man, lost in the gray mists of the Pleistocene, the evolving mammal that was to become *homo sapiens* was differentiated into two main branches. The first was the one familiar to all students of primate evolution, the one which climaxed in Cro-Magnon and so-called modern man.

The second was a very large strain, going back to Gigantopithecus and Maganthropus, and dividing conclusively with Pithecanthropus robustus. By the time of the second interglacial, there were two distinct species of man

on the earth. One group, composed of Average men, lived in caves. The other group, composed of Advanced men, dwelt in the midst of a flourishing civilization.

The two groups were quite different, and in a very fundamental way. The size was important mainly as a convenient tag for differentiating between the two groups at a glance; the real difference lay in their relative effectiveness as cultural units. There was no real significant difference in the "intelligence" of the two kinds of men. The true differences between them could be traced to a single fact: the Advanced men had learned a lesson, learned it early and learned it well.

The only mutation involved had been a cultural one.

The Advanced men had learned the secret of cooperation.

It was painfully obvious, really, that the real key to evolution lay in the concept of cooperation and not in competition. It was not competition between men that enabled the species to survive; it was cooperation between men. One man alone was nothing. A society of men, working together, was invincible.

The Advanced men learned this early. They learned it, and they applied it. Naturally, as they pooled their resources within their group, they pulled ahead rapidly. The same snowballing effect that

AXE AND DRAGON

By **KEITH LAUMER**

Illustrated by **Morrow**

Synopsis of Parts

One and Two

It was a long way from young Lawrence O'Leary's drab little bedroom in Mrs. MacGlint's Clean Rooms and Board (Colby Corners, U.S.A.) to the anachronistic dream world of Artesia, but when the penniless draftsman tried Professor Schimmerkopf's method for releasing the Psychic Energies, he got there in practically no time at all.

Marvelling at his unsuspected powers, O'Leary tested them further in the Axe and Dragon Tavern across the way, only to send its occupants off screaming sorcerer, all except Red Bull, the cut-purse who stood his

ground, kept insisting that O'Leary was the Phantom Highwayman, and suggested they team up together. Then they were interrupted by the police—dressed like musketeers—who ar-



CONCLUSION

The fast-moving conclusion to one of the most entertaining novels to appear in Fantastic, but that's only to be expected when it's by Keith Laumer, popular author of A Trace of Memory and The Great Time Machine Hoax. —By now young Lawrence O'Leary (formerly of peaceful Colby Corners, U.S.A.) is so thoroughly enmeshed in the affairs of Artesia—the dream world somehow realer than his own—that we find him setting out alone across the western desert, looking for a legendary giant named Lod, whose citadel is guarded by a dragon that O'Leary must slay if he ever expects to see the lovely princess Adoranne again.



rested O'Leary on a charge of sorcery and brought him before the king.

Goruble the king showed only moderate interest in the case until he spotted O'Leary's ring

(bearing an axe and dragon device). Then he immediately ordered a private conference with the young stranger, during which he tried to probe deeper, but O'Leary couldn't remember

where or when he first acquired the ring. Goruble then suggested that he wear it with the device turned inward—because of a local legend that could cause its owner, a stranger, some embarrassment during his stay in Artesia. O'Leary complied. Then the kind turned to a more cryptic line of questioning, flew into a rage when O'Leary said he couldn't follow him, and ordered an immediate trial. The charge—sorcery.

During the trial Nicodaeus, the court magician, tried to soften the king's anger, but Goruble seemed determined to see O'Leary executed. At the last moment, Yockabump the dwarf (the king's jester) popped up, goggled at O'Leary's ring, and chided everyone for not recognizing the hero that legend said would one day arrive to deliver Artesia from the menace of the great dragon guarding Lod the giant's stronghold in the west. Urged by Nicodaeus, O'Leary played along and agreed to slay the dragon. Obviously dubious, the king dropped his charge and ordered the traditional celebration for legendary heroes.

After a misadventure with Daphne (the upstairs maid), whom he accidentally conjured up—bathtub and all—in his room, and after some guarded queries from Nicodaeus, who was probably more than he

seemed, O'Leary went down to the party in his honor and forgot all his doubts when he first glimpsed the beautiful princess Adoranne. In fact, he began paying so much attention to her that her escort, Count Alain, became incensed enough to challenge O'Leary to a "fencing match," whose deadly consequences O'Leary avoided by insisting on pistols (specially conjured up by him) that turned the whole thing into a farce—with each opponent squirting the other with colorful ink. As it turned out, though, O'Leary was still almost skewered by the enraged count, who—at the last moment—was knocked unconscious by a well-aimed chamber pot that Daphne the maid tossed from an upper window.

Later that night, however, O'Leary's luck changed. Just as he was about to turn in, a hoarse whisper in his darkened bedroom urged him to hurry to the princess's defense. Suspicious but taking no chances where Adoranne was concerned, O'Leary hurriedly followed the cloaked figure through a sliding panel and down darkened passageways. Then before he could figure out exactly how it happened, he found himself shoved into Adoranne's bedroom, accused of attempting to ravish the princess and carry off her jewels, and sentenced to die in

the morning.

Before the execution, however, he managed to escape from his cell by journeying back to Colby Corners, where he was delayed by the police (for turning up in the girls' shower at the Y). When he got back to Artesia, he slipped into the palace—via the secret passageways—stumbled upon some basement rooms jammed with very advanced electronic equipment (which he vaguely connected with Nicodaeus), and made his way up to Adoranne's room—but she was gone.

Then O'Leary slipped up to Nicodaeus' laboratory where he found the magician busily conducting an experiment that apparently required such diverse items as dense greenish smoke and crackle-finish instrument panels. The old fellow, apparently genuinely glad to see O'Leary, kept asking about Adoranne's whereabouts. She was missing! Exasperated, O'Leary denied the implied charge, and they both began puzzling over the matter, O'Leary finally deciding that the only logical suspect was Lod the giant (a former suitor) who must have spirited the girl away to his stronghold in the west. Then a sudden pounding at the door—it was the palace guard—sent O'Leary dashing out of the laboratory, but not without the nagging suspicion that somehow Nicodaeus had betrayed him.

Determined to rescue Adoranne, O'Leary managed to get to the city wall, only to bump into the Red Bull again, who still wanted to team up. More to get rid of him than anything else, O'Leary pretended to agree, sent him off to sneak into the palace to pick up what loot he could find, and agreed to meet him later. O'Leary also offered to care for Red Bull's horse, just what he needed to get across the desert.

Later that night O'Leary set out along the West Post Road, determined to find Lod's stronghold—and Adoranne. But by morning he was hot, weary, saddle-sore, and hungry—and still far from his destination. On the way he had tried to conjure up some food, but all he could manage was two saddlebags bulging with salt water taffy—and nothing else. Sadly munching the cloying candy, he traveled the rest of that day until at dusk he came upon an oasis where he and his horse refreshed themselves in a brackish pool. Then he pitched a makeshift tent and fell into exhausted sleep.

The next morning, at dawn, he awoke abruptly, sure that something had disturbed him. Sword drawn, he made a thorough search. Nothing. Then just as he began to relax, something suddenly jabbed him in the mid-

dle of the back. Turning with a startled yelp, he gaped up at an apparition looming up six and a half feet wide and a yard wide. Piercing eyes burned above a bristling black beard. From a faded burnous a leathery hand projected, gripping a four-foot-long cutlass with an edge that caught the light like a well-stropped razor.

Chapter X

"You're camping in private property, Mister," a thin bari-tone announced. "This oasis is the property of the Elected of Ugbah, praised be His Name!"

"Private property, eh?" O'Leary eyed the bared blade nervously, edged backward. "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll pack up my camp and move on, just as soon as my horse and I have a drink—"

"The water, too, is the property of the Elected of Ugbah. On your way as you stand, dog of an infidel, and don't tarry to police the area."

"I've got a long ride ahead," O'Leary protested. "You don't expect me to ride all day without even a drink of water—"

"The Elected expect nothing of the Forgotten of Ugbah except treachery and light fingers. Begone, now—"

"Just a minute!" O'Leary felt his temper mounting. "I don't

know who elected you, but I demand a vote! I want water, and I intend to get it." He whipped his rapier from its sheath. "As far as I'm concerned, this is the lousiest stretch of real estate I've seen in some time, and you're welcome to it—but first, I'm going to get a drink—and my horse, too." He assumed Position One, one hand on his hip, the blade out-thrust at a forty-five degree angle. The bearded stranger took a step backward, frowning.

"You would dispute the issue with me, mightiest warror of the Elect? Ride on, fool, before I spit you like a hot dog at a weenie roast!"

"Not until I get water!"

"Then perish, pig of an Unbeliever!" The bearded man lunged; O'Leary's blade parried the other's weapon with a dull smack!—and clung. The stranger pulled back on his blade, dragging O'Leary with him. O'Leary planted his feet, hauled with all his strength. Before his shocked eyes, his sword elongated, stretching out to five feet, six. . . .

"What Satan's trickery is this, Unenlightened of Ugbah?" The bearded man yanked hard, gained another foot of ductile sword-blade. He shook his weapon, entangled it in a loop of O'Leary's sword, which was all of eight feet long now, dangling

in a slender festoon from grip to point of attachment. The now frantic stranger reached, caught a handful of the offending material, pulled, found his hand glued shut. He dropped his cutlass, clawed at the gummy substance, loudly invoking Ugbah, and His prophet, Irving.

O'Leary watched, mystified; he raised his swordhilt with its attached stub of blade, sniffed, then tasted.

"Taffy," he said disgustedly. "Boy, when I want taffy, I get taffy!" He eyed the other's struggles. "Better get over to the spring and wash it off," he suggested.

The bearded warrior was backing away from him, making passes in the air, each of which added another filament of adhesive taffy to the composition. He stopped dead at O'Leary's words.

"Taffy?" he said. He raised a hand cautiously, touched it to his tongue. He nodded. "Well, damned if it isn't," he said wonderingly. "What goes on here, Mister? Are you afflicted of Ugbah or something?"

"As it happens," O'Leary improvised, "I'm travelling in soft goods just now. That's one of our most popular novelty numbers, the taffy sword, delights your friends and confounds your enemies, a thousand laughs for all occasions. Now, if you'll just step aside, I'll get on with

watering my faithful steed, and then I'll proceed to my next scheduled stop—"

The bearded man took a bite of the candy adhering to his thumb, chewed vigorously. "I love taffy," he commented. "But it's hell when you get it in your beard." He wagged his head at O'Leary, smiling sheepishly. "I guess this one's on me, friend. I'll bet the look on my face was a prize-winner."

"Just my little way of introducing the product," O'Leary explained modestly.

"You had me fooled; I thought I was in for a brisk exchange; you looked pretty determined. I was starting to wish I'd taken a little softer line. Actually, I'm not so hot with the saber bit, but you know, the chief expects it."

"Sure. Now I'll just hurry along—"

"I'm Jakop, the shereef around these parts." The bearded man thrust out a hand that looked as hard as a wooden Indian's. O'Leary shook it briefly.

"Say, you haven't got any of those nifty neckties that glow in the dark, have you Al Eary? You know, the ones that say 'Baby, kiss me quick'?"

O'Leary was leading the horse toward the pond now, the bearded man pacing along at his side.

"I happen to be fresh out of that item, but I'll drop one off on my next trip through—"

"What else you got in those saddle-bags?" The desert-dweller eyed them thoughtfully.

"Ah—nothing much. Just—you know—supplies."

"What do you mean, nothing? What kind of a peddler are you? You got no stock?"

"I've had a good week; I'm cleaned out—"

"Then why you headed west? You ought to be on your way back to lay in a new cargo."

"Oh—am I headed west? I must be lost—"

"Your trail is straight as a stretched neck." The bearded man halted and brought up the taffy-hung blade. "Better let me take a look in those bags, Mister. We don't need any spies out here, any dogs of infidels, any treacherous—"

"You're repeating yourself—but if you insist. . . ." O'Leary halted, opened the left saddlebag. "Look for yourself," he invited. The stranger approached cautiously, reached in, lifted out the box of Aunt Hooty's.

"Hey!" he said. "My favorite! Ah, 'Al Eary, you crafty rascal you! Holding out! Driving the price up eh? Well, don't worry. The chief will deal generously with you. Hurry up and water the horse, and we'll ride on into camp. It's not far."

"No time for sidetrips," O'Leary protested. "I have im-

portant customers to see, and—"

"None more important than Hamid, Kaid of the Elect of Ugbah!" The stranger waved the sword. "He'll welcome you with open arms; he'll call out the dancing girls; he'll lay on a feast—"

"Did you say . . . feast?"

"Sure! Roast camel-hump, cous-cous, gefiltefish, a smörgasbord that will knock your eyes out, sub gum chow yuk, Mulligan stew, sukiyaki, apfel strudel, poi, enchiladas, plenty of Pepsi, and all the Sen-Sen you can use afterward. A traditional tribal blow-out!"

"Well, I'm a little cautious about sampling native foods, but it *does* sound tempting."

"It's a deal then! Saddle up and let's go; we'll be there in time for lunch."

The Kaid Hamid of the Elect of Ugbah was a deep brown, three-hundred pound cone of oily flesh, sitting cross-legged on a vast oriental-type carpet with a pattern of Irish setters flushing quail, under the shelter of a roomy tent through which mellow amber light filtered. He was wrapped in capacious folds of slightly soiled white cloth—parachute nylon, O'Leary thought to himself—with one immense elbow buried in a heap of garishly-colored cushions lettered MOTHER and KOREA, while

an overweight maiden of some fifty summers waved a large fan over his head. He looked O'Leary over, his slit eyes cold. "A commercial traveler, eh?" he said in a voice like process cheese. "Trade not too brisk, I assume?"

"Ah-ah, you're not going to catch me on that one, Your, ah, Kaidship." O'Leary wagged a finger in playful reproof. "Actually, I'm reserving most of my stock for my regular customers beyond the mountains—special order items, you know."

"Beyond the mountains?" The Kaid's voice hardened. "Wouldst venture there—through the Place of the Evil Djinn?"

"Sure. Neither rain nor sleet nor dark of night nor dragons nor djinns shall bug the peddler in the swift completion of his appointed rounds."

"Gee, that's well put," the fan-maiden said. "I'm nuts about poetry. Do you like Edgar A. Guest?"

"Silence, Gazella!" The Kaid snarled. "Art in league with Shaitan, then, *Roumi* dog?"

"Don't snap at *me*, or you can work this damn fan yourself," Gazella muttered.

"Hey, I promised O'Leary here he'd get a friendly reception," Jakop protested.

The Kaid grunted. "The Elect traffic not with the minions of Hell," he announced flatly.

"By the way, you wouldn't

happen to know just how far it is to the pass, would you?" O'Leary changed the subject. "I seem to have lost my bearings a little."

The Kaid eyed him with unconcealed hostility, said nothing. In the awkward silence, Jakop crossed the tent and rummaged in a box, came back and folded out a yard-square chart.

"We're right here—" he began.

"Divulge nothing to this unbidden interloper!" the Kaid belowered. "Wouldst betray the ancient secrets of the Elect to every prying agent of the Powers of Darkness?"

"Now, wait a minute, Chief!" the shereef objected. "I offered Al Eary the protection of the House of Jakop—!"

O'Leary craned to get a look at the map as the wrangle continued. It was handsomely printed in four colors on heavy stock; the box in the lower right-hand corner announced that it was a Mercator Projection at a scale of 20,000:1, and was issued by the National Geographic Society—

The Kaid lunged suddenly, snatched away the chart. "See? Even now the infidel thrusts his long nose into the arcane knowledge reserved to the Elect—"

"Nuts," O'Leary said. "There are a million copies of that map floating around. Anybody who reads the *Geographic* has seen it.

The Kaid blinked. "Thou art a member of the Brotherhood?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"I subscribe to the *Geographic*, if that's what you mean." O'Leary reached into his hip pocket, took out his wallet, extracted a card and handed it over. The Kaid peered, lips moving. "Bismallah!" he exclaimed. "It is even as the stranger says! He is in truth a member in good standing of the National Geographic Society! Ugbah be praised, let him be welcomed as an honored guest!"

"Sure, that's what I said all along," Jake nodded approvingly.

"Can I look at the map now?" O'Leary inquired.

"Certainly, Al Eary! Feast thy eyes on the document! See, my camp is here. . . ." The Kaid indicated a point in the center of a wide sweep of pale tan labelled 'Desert.' "Beyond, at a distance of three leagues, lie the Mountains of Glass. The pass is here." He pointed out a break in the line of puckered brown. "And beyond the pass roams the fearful Djin, salve of the giant Al Od." The Kaid looked calculatingly at O'Leary. "Tis not meet that I further question the motives of a Brother in Geography, Al Eary—but I cannot but wonder what traffic thou seekest with these Doers of Evil, in league as they are with the enemies of Ugbah."

"Well, as I mentioned earlier—

I'm just making a routine delivery. After all, a businessman can hardly afford to make arbitrary distinctions."

"Hmmm. Half a year since, I despatched a caravan there to offer spices, hand-rolled cigars, and barbecued Camel ribs in trade for the rare gems legend has it are to be found beyond the pass. None returned to tell of what befell. The only consolation was, I had a whopping loss to figure in my income tax return."

O'Leary frowned sympathetically. "Tell me, have you fellows seen anyone riding in that direction lately? About a day or two ago, say?"

The Kaid and Jake exchanged glances. "Now that thou mentionest it, Al Eary, it comes to mind that indeed a party of four riders passed that way, late Tuesday afternoon—"

"Tuesday. The day before yesterday. It fits. Was one of them a great big brute—did he seem to have a captive with him?"

"Of these matters I can tell you nothing, Al Eary. We of the Elect live in uneasy truce with Al Od, accursed be his name. My scouts ventured none too close, lest the evil eye deprive them of their senses and send them raving into the desert wastes."

"Well—it's a lead, anyway, I don't suppose you'd care to lend me a few warriors to ride along with me?"

The Kaid made a sign in the air. "Who dies at the hands of the fiends shall never pass the gates of Paradise. Ask what else you will, Brother in Geography, and it shall be granted: food, water, my fastest racing camel—but not the souls of my warriors."

"Speaking of camels," Jakop put in, "I happen to own a small used-mount lot; I can offer you a good deal on a clean one-owner animal, and give you a nice allowance on that nag you're riding."

"No, thanks, I'm a poor sailor." O'Leary glanced toward the sun, visible as a bright patch against the canopy overhead.

"Look, I hate to seem impatient, but I *am* a little eager to hit the road. It's already past noon, and I have a long way to go before dark—"

"Hey, Al Eary," Jake put in. "You were going to stay for chow, remember? It'll be ready in another hour. Meanwhile, you get the regular VIP routine; the handmaidens will give you a bath and a nice rubdown with scented oil, and hang some fine raiment on you—we've got some cool threads in store for occasions like this—and they'll curl your beard—of course you don't have one, but you get the idea. Then the meal starts with big bowls of fruit—the girls peel it and feed it to you—and then—"

"I'm sold," O'Leary agreed,

smiling in anticipation, wincing at the same time at a renewed pang from his stomach. "I guess a few hours won't make any difference, and I won't be much help to Adoranne if I starve before I get there."

"Great is the wisdom of Al Eary," the Kaid grunted. He clapped his hands. "Let the preparations commence!"

The banquet tent was a vast translucent canopy of canvas through which the filtered mid-afternoon sunlight gleamed down a golden yellow on the cushion-strewn carpets arranged in a circle fifty feet in diameter. In the center of the ring were arrayed a mouth-watering display of vast, steaming bowls of hot rice-and-meat dishes redolent of rich gravy and spices, immense trays stacked with eclairs and jelly doughnuts, bowls overflowing with freshly-shelled shrimp and lobster claws, capacious dishes of fruits, vegetables, platters of whole roast fowl, great pink hams, broiled tenderloins side by side on cutting boards like boats in harbor, glowing pink where the razor-edged knives of the cooks had sliced away generous servings, heaps of roasted and salted almonds, cashews, pecans, Brazil nuts, iced containers of oysters and lichee nuts, and, in a place of honor, an imposing mound of Aunt Hooty's taffies.

"Wow!" O'Leary commented. "Quite a spread!" He looked down at the silver-white pearl-embroidered vest he wore over his collarless pale green shirt, admiring the bag of the scarlet pants, the graceful curve of the handsome scimitar hung at his waist, the dull gleam of the soft black leather boots with turned-up toes. "You know Jake, this outfit is comfortable, once you get used to it; just right for lounging around on cushions."

"If you just had a nice beard, Al Eary, you'd look quite imposing now," Jake commented. "Come on; let's grab our seats before some of those social climbers that are always sucking up to the Kaid get them."

The shereef led the way to places on either side of the oversized heap of pillows awaiting the chief. O'Leary sat down cross-legged, his salivary gland working in anticipation. Two beaming girls, slender and shapely in scanty vests, strung beads and gold-pieces and transparent trousers, patted the pillows into shape for him, offered a bowl of scented water, scattered rose petals, then sank down beside and a little behind him, set to rubbing the kinks from his shoulders.

"We have to wait till the old boy gets here," Jake said. "Meanwhile, the girls are supposed to keep us happy. Kind of corny, but what the hell."

"Ummmm," O'Leary said. "Feels good—"

"Oh-oh, on your feet!" Jake scrambled up; O'Leary followed suit.

The Kaid, supported on either side by solidly-built women resembling retired lady wrestlers, waddled into view through the ornamented tent-flap, puffed to his place and sank down with a whoosh! of air expelled from the cushions.

At once, shrill pipes wailed; a swarm of girls appeared, caught up platters of food, trotted with them to the diners, while turbaned men with large jugs came forth, knelt to pour streams of amber liquid into waiting goblets. O'Leary watched as a wide silver plate was laden for him; the two girls assigned to feed him knelt at his side; one selected a huge grape, peeled it with deft fingers, as the other readied a slice of deep orange melon. He sighed in anticipated ecstasy, closed his eyes, opened his mouth—

There was a sudden sense of the ground sinking under him, a *blip* as though a giant bubble had burst, followed by an abrupt silence broken only by a distant carrump! and the lonely *skriiii* of a bird. O'Leary's eyes snapped open.

He was sitting alone on a tiny island with one palm tree in the center of a vast ocean.

CHAPTER XI

From the top of the tree—a stunted specimen consisting of half a dozen listless fronds bunched at the top of a skinny trunk—O'Leary gazed out to sea. Beyond the white breakers that ploughed across the bright green of the shoal to hiss on the flat beach, deep blue water stretched unbroken to the far horizon. A few small petrel-like birds wheeled and called, dropping to scoop up tid-bits as the waves slid back from the shelf of sugar-white sand. Three or four small white clouds cruised high up in the sunny sky. It was a perfect spot for a quiet vacation, O'Leary conceded—wherever it was. His stomach gave a painful spasm as he thought of the food that had been spread before him, just ten minutes earlier.

He slid back down to the ground, slumped against the trunk of the tree. This was a new form of disaster. Just when he'd thought he had a few of the rules figured out—zip! Everything had gone to pieces. How had he gotten to *this* ridiculous place? He certainly hadn't wished himself here—he'd never even given a thought to inhabiting a desert isle as a population of one. And that feast—another second and he would have had at least *one* bite to sooth his aching interior. . . . And, of course, his efforts to shift

the scene back to the feast had failed; somehow, he couldn't seem to keep his mind on the subject while his stomach was shooting out distress signals. Just when he needed his dreaming abilities most, they deserted him. He thought of Adoranne, her cool blue eyes, the curl of her golden hair, the entrancing swell of her girlish figure. He got to his feet, paced ten feet, reached the water's edge, paced back. Adoranne had given him a hanky and was doubtless expecting him to come charging to her rescue—and here he sat, marooned on this looney island. Damn!

Never mind. Pacing and chewing the inside of his lip wasn't going to help. This was a time to think constructively. He put his hands to his hollow stomach; the pangs interfered with his ability to concentrate. He couldn't even think about escape until he'd had some food! The palm tree wouldn't help: It was devoid of coconuts. He eyed the water's edge. There might be fish there. . . .

O'Leary took a deep breath, concentrated, pictured a box of matches, a package of fish hooks, and a salt shaker. Surely, that wouldn't overtax his powers, a modest little hope like that. . . . There was a silent thump. Quickly, O'Leary checked his capacious pockets, brought out from one a book of matches labelled *The*

Alcazar Roof Garden: Dancing Nitely, and a miniature container of Morton's salt with a perforated plastic top; the other produced a paper containing half a dozen straight pins.

"The Huck Finn Bit, yet," he muttered, bending one of the pins into a rude hook. He remembered then that he had neglected to evoke a length of line to go with the hooks. That, however, could be easily remedied. He picked a thread loose from the inside of the beaded vest, unravelled four yards of tough nylon line. For bait . . . hmmm . . . a cluster of the tiny pearls from his vest ought to attract some attention.

He looped the thread to the hook, pulled off his boots, waded out a few yards into the warm surf. A school of tiny fish darted past in the transparent crest of a breaking wave; a large blue crab waved ready claws at him, scuttled away sideways leaving a trail of cloudy sand. He cast his line out, picturing a two pound trout cruising just below the surface....

It was nearly two hours later when O'Leary licked his fingers and lay back with a sigh of content to plan his next move. It had taken him three tries to land his fish—the pins, he discovered, tended to straighten out at the first good tug. The scimitar had been a clumsy instrument for cleaning his catch, but as a skillet, the wide blade had served well

enough, held over the driftwood fire that still glowed in the hollow he had scooped in the sand. All things considered, it hadn't been a bad meal, for something improvised in a hurry. And now the time had come to think constructively about getting off the island. It would help if he knew where he was; it didn't seem to be any part of Artesia—and it certainly didn't look like Colby Corners. Suppose he tried to transfer back home now, and wound up in the humdrum world of foundries and boarding houses; suppose that Artesia, once lost, could never be regained. . . .

But time was precious. Already the sun was sinking toward the orange horizon and another day nearly gone.

He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth and focussed his thoughts on Artesia: The narrow, crooked streets, the tall, half-timbered houses, the spires of the palace, the cobbles and steam-cars and forty-watt electric lights—and Adoranne, her patrician face, her smile—

He was aware of a sudden stress in the air, a sense of thunder impending, then a subtle jar, as though the Universe rolled over a crack in the sidewalk—

He felt himself drop two feet and a gush of cold salt water engulf him.

O'Leary sputtered, swallowed a mouthful, fought his way to

the surface. He was immersed in a choppy, blue-black sea, ruffled by a chilly breeze. The island was nowhere in sight—but off to the left—a mile or more, he estimated as a wave slapped him in the face—was a shoreline, with lights. . . .

He was sinking, dragged down by the heavy sword and the sodden clothes. The belt buckle was stubborn; O'Leary wrenched at it, freed it, felt the weight fall away. His boots next. . . . He got one off, surfaced, caught a quick breath; the clothes were dragging him down like a suit of armor. He tried to shrug out of the vest, snarled it around his left arm, nearly drowned before he got his head free of the surface for another gulp of air. It was all he could do to hold his own, now; he was out of breath, tiring fast. The cold water seemed to paralyze his arms. His hands felt like frozen cod. He managed a glance shoreward, made out a familiar projection of land: the blunt tower of the Kamoosa Point Light. He knew where he was now: Swimming in the Bay, twenty miles west of Colby Corners.

He went under again, shipping more water. His arms. . . so tired. His lungs ached. He'd have to breathe soon. What a fool he'd been . . . shifted himself back to Colby Corners . . . and since he'd traveled twenty miles to the west, naturally he'd wound

up in the Bay . . . too tired . . . couldn't swim any longer. . . cold . . . going down. . . too bad. . . if he could have just seen her turned-up nose once more. . . .

—and something slammed against his back. The cold and pressure were gone, as though they had never been. O'Leary gasped, brought in air this time, coughed, spat salt water, rolled over and coughed some more. After a while his breathing was better. He sat up, looked around at an expanse of twilight sand—lots of it, stretching away to a line of jagged peaks against the blaze of sunset. He got shakily to his feet, stared around at the ground, churned up by footprints of men and animals. There was a discarded leather strap lying nearby, a broken bootlace, over there a heap of melon rinds. He could see the vague outline of a circle in the sand a few yards distant, and the marks where a tent had been pegged out. . . .

He was back in Artesia—at the camp-site of the Kaid Hamid—but the desert dwellers were gone. O'Leary surveyed the scene dejectedly. Apparently there was something about a visiting peddler who evaporated into thin air that had upset the merry tenor of camp life. Well, he couldn't blame them—but now he was alone, stranded, barefooted, weaponless, without his horse and supplies, with no map, no guide. . . .

He walked across and trampled sand, sadly noting the heaps of shrimp and crab shells, the fruit rinds, the feathers and trimmings of the feast—and there, untouched in the center of the abandoned circle, a heap of taffies. He smiled ruefully. His goodies had lost their popularity when their donor had vanished. It was rather sad—but a lucky break for him; now at least he would have *something* in the way of food for the long walk ahead. He looked up at the stars, coming into view now in the darkening sky. The best bet would be to get a few hours of sleep, then start on while it was still cool. Already he was chilled in the thin, wet clothes he wore. Too bad he hadn't insisted on keeping his riding outfit—

But maybe it was here somewhere, too. He made his way quickly to the area of the tent where the bathmaidens had plied their arts, cast about in the darkness, and in five minutes turned up his abandoned shirt, jodhpurs, boots, and jacket. The remains of the taffy sword lay a few yards away. Hastily, O'Leary pulled off the damp garments he wore, dried himself, shivering in the light breeze, donned his recovered garb. There, that was a lot better! Now to grab a few hours sleep, and then resume the march by moonlight. A pity the Elect hadn't been impressed enough with his

disappearing act to leave the horse behind, too—but that would be asking *too* much. He picked a spot at random, scraped a hollow in the sand, and curled up to sleep.

By mid-morning, O'Leary had covered, he estimated, no more than five miles of loose sand, in which his feet floundered and slipped with the maddening sense of frustrated progress so familiar to dreams. At each step his boots sank in to the ankle, and when he thrust forward, they slid back. Every time he lifted his blistered feet, it was like hauling a cast-iron anchor out of soft mud. At this rate, he'd never reach the mountains.

He sat down heavily, pulled loose the bandana he had tied over his head as an ineffective shield against the increasingly hot sun, mopped his forehead. He wouldn't sweat much more today; there was no moisture left in his body. The taffies that bulged his pockets and the candy ham slung over his shoulder were soft, melting. He peeled the wrapper from an Aunt Hooty's, sucked the sweet, salty confection. The nourishment was welcome, but it made him thirstier than ever. No hope of a drink in sight, either. He shaded his eyes, scanned the stretch of rippled sand ahead. There was a slight rise to a wind-sculptured crest three hundred yards distant. What if there

should happen to be water on the far side of the hill. And why shouldn't there be? He envisioned the scene, marshalling what was left of his Psychic Energies. Then—had he felt the slight jar that signalled success?

With a sudden sense of urgency, he scrambled up, made for the ridge, stumbling and falling—he was getting weak, he realized as he rested on all fours before getting up and ploughing on. But just over the rise would be the oasis, the green palms, the pool of clear, cool water, the blessed shade.

Only a few yards now; he lay flat, catching his breath. He was a little reluctant to top the rise, he acknowledged; suppose the oasis wasn't there after all? But that was negative thinking; not the sort of thing Professor Schimmerkopf would approve of at all. He got up, tottered on, reached the hilltop, looked down across a gentle slope of sun-glared sand at the square bulk of a big red Coke machine. It stood fifty feet away, slightly tilted, a small drift of sand against one side, all alone in the vast wasteland. O'Leary broke into an unsteady run, stumbled to a halt beside the monster, noted approvingly the soft hum of the compressor. But where did the power come from? The heavy-duty electric cable trailed off a few yards and disappeared into the sand. But never mind the nit-

picking details. O'Leary tried his left pants pocket, brought out a dime, dropped it with trembling fingers into the slot. There was a heart-stopping pause after the coin clattered down, then a deep interior rumble, a clank, and the frosted end of a bottle banged into view in the delivery chute. O'Leary snatched it up, levered the cap off in the socket provided, and took a long, thirsty drag. It was real Coke, all right, just like up town. Funny, it actually being here; it was a long way to the nearest bottling plant. Lafayette lifted the bottle, peered at its underside. *Dade City, Florida* the raised letters in the glass read. Amazing! Civilization was penetrating even into the most primitive areas, it appeared.

But what about Artesia? Surely it wasn't included on the rounds of the soft-drink distributors. Ergo, it could only have come from the 'real' world—transported here by the concentrated O'Leary Will. He had already established that when he evoked conveniences like bathtubs and dresses, his subconscious merely reached out and grabbed the nearest to hand; but the idea that he could fetch them all the way from Dade City was a bit frightening. Still, it was a comfort in a way; it lent a note of some sort of rationality to what had heretofore seemed pure magic. What it boiled down to was that he had somehow stumbled

onto the trick of moving objects around from one spot to another—not dreaming them up out of whole cloth. But that seemed to imply that Artesia was a real place; but if that were so, where was it? He'd certainly never seen it on any map, even a National Geographic Society one.

But wherever it was, it was real enough to kill an unwary traveller who broke too many rules. The question of its subjective existence would have to wait till later—after he'd extricated Adoranne—and himself—from the present predicament.

Ten minutes later, refreshed and with two spare bottles tucked in his hip pockets, O'Leary resumed the march toward his distant objective.

It was late afternoon when he reached the foothills—bare angles and edges of broken, reddish rock, thrusting up from the sea of sand. Cool air moved here in the shadow of the peaks above, soothing his sun-burned face. He rested on a flat ledge, finished his last coke, emptied the sand from his boots for the twentieth time since dawn, then resumed his trek, bearing northwest now, following the line of the escarpment. Still a long way to go, but the footing was better here; the sand was firmer, and there were patches of pebbly ground and even a few stretches of flat rock—a real luxury. With luck he should make

the pass by dark; then tomorrow the final leg to Lod's HQ. As for water, that was no problem; he'd just provide a nice spring up ahead somewhere—and while he was at it, why not a steed, too?

O'Leary stopped dead. Why hadn't he thought of that sooner? Of course, it would have been a little difficult to convince himself that there was a horse standing by, all by himself, out in the desert. An animal wasn't like a coke machine; he had to have food and water. A long extension cord wouldn't do the job.

But here—with plenty of opportunities for nice deep caves, and hidden fastnesses up in the hills—sure, a mount could be wandering around here. In fact, he'd find him, just around an outcropping up ahead. A fine, sturdy beast, adapted to the desert, strong, high-spirited, bright-eyed, and not too nervous to get close to. . . .

Four outcroppings and two hours later, O'Leary's pace had flagged noticeably. No horse yet—but that didn't mean, he reminded himself, that he wouldn't find him soon. He hadn't said which outcropping he'd be behind. Probably this next one, just another half a mile ahead. . . .

He plodded on, sucking a taffy. Getting thirsty again. He'd have to produce that spring pretty soon—but first, the mount. His boots had been designed for riding, not hiking. The sand in-

side his collar and under his belt was wearing the hide away, too. Not much fun, walking across a desert—but then, Adoranne hadn't enjoyed her crossing, either.

He reached the point of rock, thrusting out like the prow of a ship, a vertical escarpment looming forty, fifty feet above the sands. He angled out to skirt the far end, rounded the point, and found himself looking along a canyon-like ravine, cut through the towering mass of rock. The pass! He had reached it! He hurried out into the lane of late sunlight streaming down through the gap, his long shadow bobbing behind him. The sun was an orange disc above the flat horizon, reflecting bloodily from the walls of the defile. The sand here was disturbed, as though by the passing of many feet; the low sun etched the prints of boots and hooves in sharp relief. A horse had passed this way not too long ago—several horses: Lod and his party, with Adoranne, no doubt. There were other prints, too, O'Leary noted; the trail of a small lizard, a row of cat-like paw-marks—and over there—what was that? O'Leary followed the tracks with his eye; they were large—impossibly large, great three-toed impressions like something made by a giant bird. But who ever heard of a bird with feet a yard across? He smiled

at the whimsey. Probably just a trick of light on shifting sands. But where was his horse? He had definitely ordered it for delivery before clearing the pass....

There was a sound from ahead, startling in the stillness. Ah, there he was now! O'Leary stopped, cocked his head, listening. The sound came again, a scrape of hoof on rock. He smiled broadly, tried out the whistle Roy Rogers used for calling Trigger. With his parched lips, it came out a weak *tweet*. Far up the pass, a shadow moved—

Something grotesquely tall detached itself from the deep shadow of a buttress of stone at the side of the ravine—a shape that stood up fifteen feet high, slender necked, great bodied, stalking on two massive legs like a monstrous parody of a Thanksgiving turkey, except that the knees bent forward. A head like a turtle's turned his way, eyed him with bright green eyes. The lipless mouth opened and emitted a whistling cry.

"Th—that wasn't exactly what I had in mind," O'Leary announced to the landscape. It occurred to him to run, but somehow his feet seemed frozen to the spot. Through them he could feel a distinct tremor in the rock at each step of the titan. It came on, moving with ponderous grace, its relatively small forearms folded against a narrow chest, the

great curve of the belly gleaming pink in the failing light. Fifty feet from O'Leary, it halted, staring over his head and out across the desert as though pondering some weighty problem unrelated to small, knee-high creatures who invaded its domain. O'Leary stared at the spectacle, rooted to the spot. The seconds were ticking past with agonizing slowness. In a moment, O'Leary knew, the iguanodon—he recognized the type from an admirable illustration he had seen in a recent book on the dinosaurs—would notice him again, remember what had started it lumbering in his direction. He pictured it wandering on, an odd leg hanging carelessly from the corner of the horny mouth, half swallowed, already forgotten—

He caught himself. No point in helping disaster along with vivid imaginings. He wasn't dead yet. And maybe he wouldn't be, if he could just think of something—anything! A second lizard, to engage the first in mortal combat while he scuttled away to safety? Too risky. He'd be squashed in the sparring. How about a tank—one of those German Tiger models, with the big 88mm gun—no, too fantastic. A diversion, perhaps—a herd of nice fat goats wandering by.... But there weren't any goats out here. Just himself—and the dinosaur—Lod's dragon, the thought dawned

suddenly! And he'd dismissed the whole thing as a superstitious fancy. He's been wrong about that—and about a lot of other things. And now he'd never have a chance to correct his errors—

But he couldn't give up yet. There had to be something—

The great reptile stirred, swung its head about; O'Leary clearly heard the creak of scaled hide as it moved. Now it was turning back, dropping its gaze, fixing on the small figure of the man before it. A low rumble sounded from its stomach; it raised a foot, came striding forward—

O'Leary reached to his back, yanked free the taffy ham hanging by a loop of cord; with a round-house swing, he hurled it straight at the oncoming monster's snout. The mouth opened with the speed of a winking eye, engulfed the tid-bit. O'Leary turned to run, twisted an ankle, fell full length. The shadow of the giant fell across him. He tried to evoke the image of Colby Corners, willing himself there: Even drowning in the bay was preferable to serving as *hors d'oeuvre* to an oversized Gila monster—but his mind was a shocked blank.

There was a peculiar, sucking sound from above, like a boot being withdrawn from a particularly viscous mud. He turned his head, looked up; the monster was poised above him, chewing thoughtfully, strings of sticky taf-

fy linking the working jaws. O'Leary hesitated. Should he lie still, and hope the monster would forget him—or try a retreat while it was occupied?

A pointed tongue flicked out, snagged a loop of taffy dangling by one horny cheek. The behemoth cocked its head, eyed O'Leary. It was a peculiarly unnerving scrutiny. O'Leary edged away, scrambling backwards on hands and knees. The dinosaur watched; then it took a step closing the gap. With a final snap, it downed the last of the candy. O'Leary scuttled faster; the titan kept pace. O'Leary reached the wall of the canyon. The monster followed, watching with the same sort of interest that a cat evinces in a wounded mouse.

Ten minutes of this race, O'Leary decided, flopping down to breathe, was enough. If the thing was going to eat him, it could go ahead. Unless he could banish it, somehow. . . .

Go away, he thought frantically. You've just remembered your—your mate, that's it—and you have to hurry off now . . .

It wasn't going to work. The dinosaur was too close, too real, with its warty, crevassed hide, its cucumber smell, its glittering eye. He couldn't begin to concentrate. And now the big head was dropping lower, the jaws parting. This was it! O'Leary squeezed his eyes shut . . .

Nothing happened. He opened them. The vast reptilian face was hanging before him, not two yards away—and the look in the eyes was . . . hopeful?

O'Leary sat up. Maybe the thing wasn't a man-eater. Maybe it was tame. Maybe—

But of course! He had ordered a steed! This was it! Back in the palace, when he had ordered a bath, he had gotten the next best thing—and this time it seemed he had somehow summoned the neighborhood dragon—and it liked taffy. O'Leary dipped into a sagging pocket, brought out a handful of Aunt Hooty's, tossed one to the monstrous beast. It caught it—like a dog snapping at a fly, except that the clash as the jaws met was louder. O'Leary tossed half a dozen together, then the rest of the handful. The dinosaur leaned back on its tremendous tail with a sigh like a contented submarine, munched the goodies. O'Leary sighed too, slumped back against the rock. That had been a harrowing quarter hour—and it wasn't over yet. If he could just sneak away now. . . .

He started off, moving as inobtrusively as possible. The iguanadon watched him go. Twenty feet, thirty feet; just around that next turn now, and he'd bolt—

The reptile came to its feet and padded after him, dainty as an earthquake. O'Leary halted; the

huge creature squatted, holding its head low, as though waiting.

"Go 'way," O'Leary squeaked. He made shooing motions. The dinosaur regarded him gravely—almost expectantly.

"Scram!" he shouted. "Who do you think I am, Alley Oop?"

Then the idea struck him: He'd already deduced that the monster had appeared in response to his yearnings for a steed. Could it be . . . ? What an impression he'd make on Adoranne if he came cantering up to Lod's hide-out on *that*! And since it didn't appear that he'd ever shake the brute, he might as well give it a try; he wouldn't be any more vulnerable seated on its back than he was jumping around under its nose, and anyway—hadn't that book said the iguanodon was a vegetarian?

O'Leary straightened his shoulders, set his jaw, and crept cautiously around to the side. The giant head swung, following him. He paused at the leg, like the warty trunk of a tree. Not much chance of climbing that. He went on, reached the tail, thick as a fifty gallon molasses drum, tapering away across the sand. He ought to be able to make it up that route. O'Leary followed the tail out to a point where he could swing aboard, then walked up its length. As he passed the juncture with the hind legs, he found it necessary to lean forward and

use his hands, but it was easy going; the fissured hide offered excellent foot-holds. The saurian waited patiently while he scaled the stretch from haunch to shoulder, then lowered its head. O'Leary straddled the neck behind the head and the monster straightened, lifting O'Leary up to ride fifteen feet clear of the floor of the pass. There was a magnificent view from up here, he noted; far away across the sands to the west he fancied he saw a smudge of vegetation, a tiny glint of light on windows. That would be Lod's hangout. He clacked his heels against the horny hide.

"Let's go, boy," he commanded. At once, the dinosaur set off at an easy canter—in the wrong direction. O'Leary yelled, kicked with one heel; the mighty mount veered, came about on the port tack, headed back up the pass. In five minutes, they were clear of the ravine, striding out across the parched plain at a mile-eating pace. The sun was gone now; deep twilight was settling across the desert. "Steady as she goes, boy," O'Leary commented aloud. "In about an hour we'll be giving this Lod character the surprise of his life."

CHAPTER XII

It was dark night with no moon as O'Leary sat his mighty steed

behind a dimly-seen screen of tall eucalyptus that marked the edge of the grounds surrounding the great building that towered up against the stars—fifteen stories at least, O'Leary estimated. Faint starlight glinted on hundreds of windows, arranged in horizontal rows; there was dim illumination behind three of them. Blazoned across a strip of what looked like dark plastic were twelve-foot high lavender neon letters that spelled out LAS VEGAS HILTON. Between him and the nearest corner of a projecting flank of the structure, a ten-foot iron fence ornamented with spear heads thrust up.

"This isn't quite what I expected, fellow," O'Leary muttered. "I pictured a collection of tin shacks, or maybe some wooden huts we could walk right through. Wouldn't do to slam into that; it might fall on us—and Adoranne might get hurt. . . ."

The dinosaur stretched its neck across the fence. O'Leary looked down at the sharp points below.

"Wouldn't do to fall on those, Dinny," he said nervously. The iguanodon leaned against the bars; they creaked, bent like soda-straws, went down.

"Nice going, boy. Hope nobody heard the clutter. . . ."

The monster lowered its head to ground level. O'Leary jumped off onto a carpet of knee-deep grass which the reptile sniffed,

then began peacefully cropping.

"All right, boy," he whispered. "The place is big, all right, but it seems to be sparsely manned. You wait here while I reconnoitre—and keep out of sight."

There was a soft snort from the great head, now lifted far above him, investigating the lower branches of a big oak. O'Leary moved off silently, skirted a waterless fountain in the shape of an abstract female, crossed a stretch of pavement marked with faint white lines at ten foot intervals, hopped a strung chain and entered the rustling, leaf-strewn shadow of a stand of poplars. From here he had an excellent view of the building. Nothing stirred. He emerged from the trees, made his way around to the front. There was a broad paved drive—concrete, by the feel of it—which swept past a flight of wide steps leading up to a rank of glass doors, above which a cantilevered marquee thrust out fifty feet. Great, unpruned gardenia bushes bunched up from planters set along the terrace; the heavy fragrance of their blossoms wafted to O'Leary on the warm night air. Inside, beyond the doors, he could see a plushly carpeted foyer, dimly-lit, its pale fawn walls decorated by framed pictures and gilt and white lamp-brackets; there were large soft-looking divans and easy chairs placed in conversational groups around low coffee

tables; the peaceful order of the scene was marred only by a scattering of papers, bones, empty tin cans, and the charred ring of a small camp-fire beside a potted yucca. Someone, it appeared, had desired more informal cooking arrangements than the hotel kitchens afforded.

O'Leary went up the steps, approached the doors, jumped as the one before him swung in with a whoosh! of compressed air. Magic, after all? He felt the untrimmed hair at the nape of his neck rising. But then, maybe it was just electronics—magic rationalized. He edged through the door, looked around the two-acre lobby. Adoranne was here—somewhere. It was going to be a long search through fifteen floors of rooms to find her, but he had to make a start somewhere. He picked a corridor at random, went along it in the eerie light to the first door, tried the knob. . . .

An hour and a half later O'Leary was working his way through the southwest wing of the ninth floor. So far he had encountered nothing but empty rooms, most of them immaculately made up, with dusty dressertops and vases of withered flowers the only sign of neglect, but a few with rumpled beds and muddy bootprints on the pastel carpets. The room he was in now was one of the latter. Some careless occupant had plucked a chicken in the bath-

room, leaving a clot of feathers in the toilet bowl. A chair had been disassembled for some reason not clear; its component members lay about the room. There were food spots on the carpet. A torn shirt lay wadded in one corner, and a smashed wastebasket was on its side half under the bed. Something bright showed among the rubbish—a key, attached to a turquoise plastic disc with the number 1281 impressed on it in gilt. O'Leary picked it up. Maybe this was a clue. It was worth checking out, anyway. So far he'd seen nothing to indicate that Adoranne was here—nor any signs of life. Perhaps Lod and his merry men were off on a raid; maybe they'd be back at any moment. He'd better hurry.

As he emerged from the stairway at the twelfth floor, the sounds of voices came to his ears—the first indication of occupancy he had encountered. He felt his heart thump in unpleasant excitement. He was getting warm, it seemed. He went along the hall in the direction indicated by a glowing arrow, rounded a corner. The sounds were louder now. 1281 would be at the end of the hall beyond the room from which the loud conversation was coming. O'Leary went on, approached the door, standing half ajar with a stripe of light falling across the carpet from inside the room.

"... seen him in the palace, two days ago," a rusty voice was complaining. "An I says to him, look, I says, if you got some kind of idear we're doing all the dirty work while you grab the loot, your aggies is scrambled."

"But he give the boss a promise he'd get the broad—" a second voice started, cut off with a sound like a croquet mallet striking a side of beef. "It ain't per-lite to call a dame a broad," the rusty voice cawed. "And I know what he promised. But it's up to us to collect. Don't worry. The boss's got his plans all doped out. He is got a couple surprises up his sleeve fer his high-and-mightiness—"

"Chee, you can't buck *him*!" a third voice said. "Wit' his power—"

O'Leary, straining to catch every word, was suddenly aware of footsteps approaching from along the corridor. He looked about quickly, dived for a door across the hall, slid inside and flattened himself against the wall.

"Hey!" a voice yelled. "Who ast you in?" A large man with lather on his face stood in the open door to the bathroom, glowering. "Go find yer own flop—" his tone changed. "Who're you? I ain't seen you before. . . ."

"Ah—I'm a new man, just signed up," O'Leary improvised. "The lure of adventure, you know, the companionship of kindred spirits.

Now, about the, ah, girl. What room's she in?"

"Huh?"

"I just wanted to nip up and make sure the door's locked. Our boss, Lod, wouldn't appreciate it if she flew the coop, eh?"

"What are ya, nuts or sump-thin?" The big man was frowning darkly, working with a forefinger in a cauliflowered ear. "She—"

The door banged open. "Hey, Iron-bender," a peg-legged John Silver type in a torn undershirt growled out. "Could I borry the loan o' yer second-best brass knucks?" The newcomer's gaze fell on O'Leary. "Who's this?" he demanded.

"A new guy; some kind of a lady's maid. How's come yer always on the scrounge, Bones? You ain't give back my thumb-screw yet, the one Ma give me—"

"A *what* kind of a maid?" Bones was eyeing O'Leary suspiciously.

"I dunno; he was asting about where the dame was. The dummy don't even know—"

"Never mind what he don't know. He's prob'ly one o' the new reinforcements. That right, bub?"

"Absolutely," O'Leary nodded. "But about the, er, prisoner. Just tell me her room number, and I'll be off. I don't want to trouble you gentlemen further."

"This dope thinks—" Iron-bender started.

"The room, huh?" Bones gave Iron-bender a look. "It's kind of hard to find. Me and him better show ya the way. Right, Iron-bender?"

The thug wrinkled his broad, flat face. "Look, I got things to do—"

"You can spare a few minutes to take care o' the demands o' hospitality. Let's go."

"Oh, you needn't bother, fellows," O'Leary protested. "Just give me the room number—"

"Not a chanct, matey; we got to do this right. Come on. It ain't far."

"Well. . . ." O'Leary followed the two out into the hall. It might help, at that, to have an escort—save some embarrassing questions if he encountered anyone else. He followed the two slope-shouldered heavyweights along the passage to a stair, up two flights, emerged in a corridor identical to all the others.

"Right this way, bud," Bones said with a smile like a benign crocodile.

They went along past silent doors, halted before one numbered 1407. Bones thumped with his knuckles: two, one, three.

A deep grunt sounded from inside.

"That doesn't sound like Adoranne," O'Leary said. "That sounds like—"

Bones jumped for him, missed as O'Leary spun aside and drop-

ped a sidehand chop across the base of the thick neck. Iron-bender, slow on the uptake, watched his companion stagger past with a muffled yell before he turned on O'Leary in time to take the latter's stiff fingers in a hard job to the sternum. He doubled over, caught a smashing uppercut with his massive chin. He shook his head.

"Hey, what goes on?" he enquired in a pained voice, reaching for O'Leary, who caught his arm, whirled, levered it across his hip—and felt himself being lifted, tossed aside. He rolled, saw Iron-bender rubbing his arm, a pained expression on his face.

"Ow," the heavyweight said. Bones was coming back now, a little haunched to the left, but an expression on his face which prompted O'Leary to leap to his feet, dash past Iron-bender, make for the stairwell at flank speed. He reached it, slammed through, hammered down one flight, plunged out into the corridor, sprinted for the corner, skidded around it—and into the waiting arms of a grizzly bear.

It was impossible, O'Leary had discovered, to concentrate on escape schemes while in a position of extreme stress—such as now, for example. The man who had gathered him in—a seven-footer with hands like machinist's vices, shoulders like football armor, and a variety of muscles to match—

held him in an awkward grip, his arms crossed behind him and raised until he danced along on tiptoe in an effort to relieve the pressure.

"I'll go quietly," he assured his captor. "How about just leaving my arms in the same old sockets they've been in all along; I kind of like them that way—"

The thick arm jerked him sideways, heading down along a new passage. O'Leary scrambled to keep the weight off his arms. The rooms here all looked lived-in, he noted in passing. Through open doors he glimpsed unmade beds, soiled garments on unswept floors, empty cracker boxes, sardine tins, bean cans. His captor came to a halt, struck a closed door two blows with his fist. The door slid back, revealing the interior of an elevator. O'Leary's jailor pushed him inside, worked a handle; the car rose one floor. They stepped out into the corridor where Ironbender and Bones stood in heated debate.

"... we tell him the guy pulls a knife, see and—"

"Naw, we don't tell him nothing. I'll say you was drunk—" The conversation broke off as the two spotted O'Leary.

"Hey!" Bones said. "Crusher got him!"

"Gee, thanks, Crusher," Ironbender said. "We'll take him off your hands now—"

Crusher made a low rumbling sound in his throat. The two lesser thugs withdrew hastily. Crusher marched O'Leary along to the door Bones had knocked on earlier. This time the knock shook the panel in its frame.

A deep voice called, "It's open, curse you!" Crusher twisted the knob, flung the door wide, and propelled O'Leary into the room.

A man sat in an immense chair placed under the window across the room. He was taller sitting down, than Crusher was, standing: That was O'Leary's first startled impression. The second was that the man was wider, thicker, heavier, more massive, than any human being he had ever seen before—by far. The third was a shocked wondering whether this *was* a man.

The massive head—carried at an angle as though the neck had been broken once and badly set—was adorned by a dark leathery face, like some heroic carving of a demon. The nose was sharply chiseled, with great flaring nostrils. The mouth was wide, thin-lipped, with a long sparsely bristled upper lip, over a massive jaw with a receding chin. Small, bright eyes stared from the oversized face, deep brown eyes with no white showing. Coarse hair, short-cropped, covered the wide, knobby skull; the leg-thick neck was muffled in a great scarf, and

the ponderous body was draped in shimmering folds of a dark wine-colored stuff. The hands that rested on the arms of the chair were big enough to hold two footballs each, O'Leary estimated. Great jewels glistened on the thick, hairy fingers. The giant twitched one of the latter members, and Crusher released his grip, backed from the room.

"So you reach my citadel," a thickly-accented voice near the lower level of the audible range rumbled. "I thought you might—though sage Nicodaeus think otherwise."

"You're—you're darn right," O'Leary said, trying hard to control a quaver in his voice. "And if you know what's good for you, you'll turn Adoranne over to me right now, and give us supplies for the trip back, and maybe I'll put in a good word for you with King Goruble."

"If I know what is good for me? Alas, little man—none ever know what is good for him—and if one knew, would he follow that path?"

"I'm warning you, Lod—you are Lod, aren't you? If you've hurt Her Highness—"

"Yes, Lod is my name." The giant's voice rang with a harder note. "Undertake to offer me no warnings, small creature. Instead, speak to me of the errand that brought you hither."

"I came for Princess Ador-

anne. . . ." O'Leary stopped to swallow. "I know you've got her, because who else—"

"At first lie, I give you pain," Lod said. "Like this." He leaned forward with a swift motion, gripped O'Leary's shoulder with one huge hand, and squeezed. O'Leary yelped in agony.

Lod lolled back, eyeing him with a touch of amusement. "At second lie, I give disfigurement; the loss of an eye, perhaps, or a crushed limb. And at third, I condemn you to hang in the Cage of Tears, where you will die with a sloth that will surprise you."

"Who—who's lying?" O'Leary managed, blinking away pain-tears. "I heard Adoranne was missing; everybody thought I did it, but that's nonsense. You're the one with the motive and the organization—"

"What? Must I inflict lesson two already . . . ?"

"He's telling the truth, you great ugly imbecile," a sharp, though muffled voice piped up from somewhere. Lod halted in mid-reach, looking disconcerted.

"Of course I'm telling the truth." O'Leary moved his shoulder. Nothing seemed to be broken. What a pity he hadn't equipped himself with a .45 automatic while he was at it; it would be a pleasure to plug this leering man-mountain—

"Who send you here?" Lod

barked. "Nicodaeus, I think, that sly traitor!"

"Nicodaeus tipped off the palace guard when I paid him a visit in his room," O'Leary said. "I'm no messenger of his."

"Ask him who *he* is, not the name of his master," the snappish voice came again. It seemed to O'Leary that it emanated from behind Lod. He craned to see who might be crouched behind the chair.

"Name yourself then, little man," Lod commanded.

"I'm Lafayette O'Leary. What's that got to do with it? I demand—"

"Where do you come from?"

"I left Artesia yesterday, if that's what you mean. Before that—well, it's kind of complicated—"

"I sense a strangeness in this man," the shrill voice piped. "Let him go, let him go!"

Lod's eyes narrowed. "You came alone and unarmed against mighty Lod. How did you pass dragon who guards my eastern gate? How—"

"As well ask the west wind why it blows," the shrewish voice shrilled. "You face power here, vile usurper! Have the wit to turn from it in humility!"

"Speak up!" Lod's voice was a snarl. "I think you fairly beg for torment!"

"Look, all I want is the girl and my freedom," O'Leary said desperately. "Tell your gorillas to release us, unharmed, and—"

Lod's immense hands jumped, caught O'Leary between them, lifted him off his feet, bruising his ribs.

"Must I tear you in two, stubborn mite—"

"Aye, kill him now—ere he tells you that which you fear to hear," the shrill voice snarled. "Shut off the voice of doom impending!"

Lod snarled, tossed O'Leary from him, then came to his feet, stood over O'Leary, ten feet tall, a mountainous, crook-backed ogre. "Must I boil you in pitch?" he boomed. "Impale you on bed of thousand needles? Break your flimsy bones on the wheel of truth? Drop you in the dark well of serpents? Bury you neck deep in broken bottles?"

O'Leary picked himself up, half-dazed by the blow when his head had struck the floor. "No, thanks." He faced the giant towering over him. "Just. . . give me Princess Adoranne and a good dinner and . . . I'll let you off easy this time."

Lod roared; the other voice squealed in wild laughter. The giant whirled, stalked back to his chair, threw himself in it, his face working through a series of Halloween expressions before settling in a grim stare.

"Kindness avail nothing with you, I see," Lod grated in a tone of forced calm. "That being case, stern measures are called for." He twitched a wrist. The door

opened. Crusher stood in it, looking like a dwarf in the shadow of Lod.

"Take him to interrogation room," the giant rumbled. "Prepare him. Then await my coming."

It seemed as though hours had passed. O'Leary felt himself sway again, tried to catch himself; then the stabbing pain as the sharp spikes set in the cage stabbed at his right shoulder. He jerked away, struck his left elbow an agonizing crack on the neatly placed projection on that side. Then again he was huddled in the only position possible in the cage; half-bent, half-crouched, his head cocked sideways. His knees and back ached; the throb of a dozen shallow puncture wounds competed for attention. He shifted minutely to relieve the cramp developing in his thigh, felt the prod of the waiting needle-points.

"This won't get you anything, Lod," he croaked. "I can't tell you who sent me, because nobody sent me. I'm operating on my own." The giant was lounging at ease in a vast chaiselongue, dressed in pale pink robes now, a voluminous scarf of purple silk wound around his grotesque neck. He waved a ringed hand as big as a briefcase.

"Be stubborn as you like, little man. It gives me pleasure to

watch you fret there, surrounded by pain, weighing one punishment against another. An artful device, Cage of Tears, for as it torments body with its spiked caresses, so does it agonize mind with the need to make frequent, painful decision." Lod chuckled contentedly, lifted a gallon-sized leathern jack, quaffed deeply, then plucked a leg from a roast turkey-sized fowl, sucked the meat from the bone in one gulp.

Moving only his eyes, O'Leary looked around the room for the fiftieth time, scanning the high, beamed ceiling, the damp earth floor, the rich rug on which Lod's chaise rested, the polished table with its burden of delicacies, the trophies hung carelessly on the rough stone walls. There were heads of great reptiles — not cured and stuffed, merely rotting empty-eyed skulls, broken weapons twice normal size, a great axe with a leather-wrapped haft and a rusted, double-bitted head. It was a cold cavernous room, apparently dug under the hotel foundation. There was nothing here he could work with—not that he could concentrate, with pain stabbing at him from every side. There was just one door, and he knew where that led. It was fruitless to try to imagine the US cavalry charging in to the rescue; King Goruble's subjects, fond though they were of the princess, were too much in dread

of Lod and his dragon to attempt to storm his citadel, even if they knew—

"I see you admire my little souvenirs," Lod rumbled cheerily. He was growing more talkative as he downed mug after mug of brown ale. "Mementos of early years, before my elevation to present eminence."

"Eminence?" O'Leary put all the scorn he could manage into the word. "You're just an ordinary crook, Lod. A little uglier than most, maybe, but there's nothing special about kidnapping and torture. The dregs of humanity have been at that sort of thing for thousands of years."

"Still you pipe merry tune," Lod boomed, smiling genially as he chewed, showing immense, square teeth. "But pain and thirst and hunger are faithful servants; they do their work, aided by their ally, fear."

"Only the fool knows no fear!" the strange shrill voice screeched suddenly. "You toy now with forces you know not of, foul tyrant!"

"Where's that voice coming from?" O'Leary croaked.

"Voice of my conscience," Lod growled, then guffawed and drank.

"Some conscience; I can hear it all the way over here. Why don't you pay some attention to it? It's smarter than you are—"

Lod lifted his lip in a snarl.

"One day I kill conscience," he muttered as though to himself. "And day grows close...." A shriek of insane laughter answered him. He drank again, spilling ale down his chin, slammed the jack to the table, eyed O'Leary balefully.

"You babble of Her Highness, Princess Adoranne, my bride-to-be," he growled. "He swore to me wench would be my prize. And now my agents bring word that he spirit her away. Time grows close; his plots ripen—and now he need me not, think he! He do away with girl—threat to his grip on throne—and cost are aside—me, to whom he swore his oath!"

"You mean . . . Adoranne really isn't here?" O'Leary stared with pain-blurred eyes at the horrendous face.

"Aye, he is sly one," the giant went on, slurring his words now. "With his promises and his gifts and his treachery. But the fool fail to remember that in my own land, I was king!" Lod banged the mug again, sloshing ale. "By force of my arm and guile of my nature, I *made* myself king! My father was mighty one, but I slew him! I!"

"He trusted you, unnatural son and brother!" the voice piped. "You cut him down while he slept—"

"To victor belong spoils!" Lod boomed. He refilled his mug,

drank, tore a great chunk from the breast of the roast bird while the thin voice screamed curses.

"But—" Lod pointed a finger at O'Leary, as the latter twitched away from the stab of a spike digging into his thigh. "Does traitor who plots in palace deal fairly with me? Does he fear powers that made me king? No! He thrust me aside, think to confine me here in this parched land while richness of cities and fields goes to him!"

"Why not?" O'Leary heard himself taunting. His mind was fogging now; only the recurrent prick of the dagger-points kept him from fainting, he suspected. "Nicodaeus knows it's safe to cheat you because you're stupid—"

"Stupid?" Lod laughed, a sound like a stone tower falling. "Yet he sent you, a weakling, here—"

"How did this weakling pass the guardian?" the voice piped. "Ask him that, mighty imbecile!"

"Yes, now you will talk!" Lod leaned forward unsteadily. "Why did the grey magician send you? Why *you*? Who are you? *What* are you? How—"

O'Leary managed a creditable Bronx cheer.

Lod started to his feet, then sank back heavily. "But I exercise myself needlessly," he muttered. "But little time, and the cage will do its work...."

"But a little time, and you die!" the disembodied voice screeched. "Then will the foul ghosts of the ancestors rend your stinking corpse, and that of my father will be foremost—"

"Silence!" Lod bellowed. He poured and drank, slopping the ale. "If I die, who then feed you, evil leech?" The giant slumped back in his chair, watching O'Leary with red-rimmed eyes. "I tire of this sport," he rumbled. "Speak now, little man. What are secret schemes of Nicodaeus? What double-dealing lies behind his promises? Why did he send you? Why? Why? Why?"

"Don't you . . . wish you knew. . .," O'Leary managed. If the cage were made of something soft, like taffy. . . or if he had thought to provide a small gun. . . or if someone—anyone—would burst in now, open the cage....

It was no use. He was stuck here. His powers didn't work under stress like this. True, when he'd been drowning, he had managed to jump back to Artesia at the last instant—but at least he had been drowning in comfort—and perhaps he hadn't yet reached the last minute. If he ever got out of this, he'd have to set up some controlled experiments, determine the extent and nature of his abilities....

But now he wouldn't escape. He'd die here; and Adoranne would never know he'd tried—

"...now, before it's too late," the tiny voice was chanting. "Let him go, foul patricide, turn back from disasters you know not of—"

"Almost," Lod rumbled blurily, "think stubborn runtling has suborned you, so merrily you cry his cause! But I am Lod, king and master, and I fear neither man nor devil nor caster of spells...."

"Fool! Let him go! I see death, and rivers of blood, and all your vile plans fallen to ruin! I see the shadow of the Great Axe that hovers over your head!"

"Great Axe hangs there amid my trophies," Lod laughed wildly. "Who's to wield it against me here?" He finished off another gallon of ale, refilled the jack with unsteady hands.

"How say you, starveling?" he called to O'Leary. "Do you tire of game? Do red-hot knives of pain loosen your tongue?"

"I'm fine," O'Leary said blurily. "I like it here. It's restful."

"Let him go!" the voice snarled.

"Let him go, cretinous monster!"

Lod shook his head in drunken stubbornness. "You see, little man, what a burden even greatness must bear. Day and night, waking and sleeping, that foul voice ever shrilling at my ear! Is enough to drive lesser man mad, eh?" He peered owlishly at O'Leary.

"I...don't hear...anything,"

O'Leary got out. "You've already...gone nuts, I guess...."

Lod laughed again, hiccupped. "No ghostly voice, this," he rumbled. "It issues from hideous lips as ever body nourished."

"That's the first sign," O'Leary gasped. "Hearing voices...."

Lod grinned. "And you, little man—you draw comfort from the impertinence you hear pass unpunished. You guess you gain an ally, eh?" Lod's chuckle was not an encouraging sound. "Small help you'll have from that quarter," he cried. "But I've been discourteous! I've not made introductions. An oversight, believe me! But I'll soon set that aright—" Lod reached to his throat, fumbled at the scarf, tore it free—

From the base of his bull-neck, a second head grew—a shrunken, wizened, hollow-cheeked copy of the first, with eyes like live coals.

"Behold my brother!" Lod mumbled; then he fell back in his chair, mouth open, eyes shut, and snored.

CHAPTER XIII

For a long minute, there was silence. Lod's snores grew louder, deeper. He stirred, flung out an arm that knocked over the ale mug. Dark fluid gushed, splashed on the floor, then settled down to a steady drip. O'Leary watched,

wide-eyed, as Lod's second head stirred, staring across at him. The lips worked.

"The...great brute...sleeps," it whispered shrilly. "The strong ale tugs at my mind also...but it will not heed it...."

O'Leary stared. The spilled ale dripped. Lod snuffled, snorted in his sleep.

"Hearken, small one," the head hissed. "Will you do my bidding, if I help you now?"

O'Leary tried to speak; his tongue seemed paralyzed. It was too much effort. He felt himself slumping against the spikes. He knew they were cutting in, but the blessed relief of a moment's rest....

"Don't die now, fool!" the head whispered harshly. "I can free you—but first your word that you will do the task I set you!"

"What—what is it?" O'Leary tried to keep his mind on what the head was saying. He knew it was important, but a great pit of soft blackness was waiting, and if he just let go, he would sink down, down....

"Listen to me! Freedom! If you swear to serve me!"

The voice penetrated the fog. His chest hurt—how it hurt! Spikes were digging in as he slumped against them. Something sharp was cutting into his cheek, and another against his jaw—

He gasped, pulled himself off the daggers. The eyes in the

shrunken head caught him, glaring.

"...now, fool! Catch at the chance Fortune throws in your path! Give me your word and I'll set you free!"

"What—what do you...want me to...do?" O'Leary managed.

"See the great axe on the wall yonder? It was written—ah, long and long ago—that by its keen edge the betrayer would meet his doom! Take it! Raise it high! Strike off his head!"

"His...head?"

"The murderer of his king and father has sworn to do the like by me," the head hissed. "He swore that none should witness his nuptial revels when he makes the Princess Adoranne his bride! The finest surgeons in the land will he summon, and under his knives I'll suffer living decapitation. He hates me, and he fears me. I, who have suffered with him through thick and thin, ever ready with a word of advice. And now he names me an embarrassment, says that I will shame him before her quaking loveliness! Ah, the vile creature! He'd remove me like a wart, cut me down in my prime! His brother!"

"How...can you...release me?"

"When he sleeps in drunken soddishness, as now, I can, a little control the body, *our* body, soon to be mine alone. How say you, little man? Is it a bargain?"

"I...I'll try."

"Done!" The glittering eyes narrowed. O'Leary saw perspiration pop out on the brown and furrowed brow under a lock of corpse's hair. One of the hairy hands stirred, groped clumsily toward the mid-region of the lax body. It parted the folds of the gown, crept inside. There was a jingle of metal. The hand emerged, holding a ring of keys. Lod snored on, his tongue lolling from his gaping mouth.

"The pain—the mortal pain of it," the second head whimpered. "But soon, soon victory is mine!"

O'Leary watched, goggle-eyed as the hand lifted the keys—then, with an awkward motion, tossed them. They struck the cage, caught on a spike, dangled inches from his hand.

"I can't reach them" he whispered.

"Try! Only a little pain stands between you and freedom! Try!"

O'Leary moved his hand an inch; spikes caught at his arm. He twisted his body sideways, feeling the thrust of other stiletto-points against his ribs and hip. He inched the arm forward and up, gritting his teeth as the skin scraped, the blood started, joining the dried blood from earlier cuts. Another inch...almost thereHis finger caught the key ring, teased it—

It dropped into his palm, and he clutched it, his heart thudding. Lod snorted, stirred. O'Leary

watched him, holding his breath. The giant's breathing steadied once more. Now for the lock. Painfully, O'Leary worked his arm back to his side, then forward, enduring the stab of the knives. His clothes were a bloody mess now, he realized dimly. He was bleeding from dozens of separate small wounds, none deep, but all painful. He was losing a lot of blood.

"The key of black iron," the head keened softly. "Quickly, now! He sleeps but lightly!"

One more effort: O'Leary took a deep breath, gripping the key in slippery fingers. He reached, forgetting the damage he was doing to his hide, concentrating on the objective. The key touched the lock; it swung away, clattering. The head cursed softly. O'Leary dropped the keys, pushed up on the dangling lock with a finger. In the chair, Lod moved his feet, reached up to rub a thick finger under his nose. The second head watched, cracked lips parted....

The lock rose, teetered, fell with a clatter. Lod half-opened his eyes, smacked his lips noisily, relaxed again. O'Leary pushed against the hinged front of the cage. It swung wide. He stumbled out, stood swaying before the sleeping giant.

"Adoranne," he said thickly. "Was he lying? Is she here...?"

"He spoke the truth, foolish

man. She is not here! Doubtless He-Who-Plots-in-the-Palace can tell you of her—But now is there no time to waste! Quickly to your duty!"

O'Leary straightened his aching back, wiped his bloodied hands on his thighs, tottered to the wall. The axe hung high, out of reach. He turned, dragged a three-legged stool over to the wall, stood on it, nearly fell, clutched at the wall for support. He reached; the haft of the axe was as big around as his wrist, diagonally wrapped with tough animal-hide, dry and hard. He gripped it, lifted it free from the rusted spike it dangled from—

The heavy weapon slipped from his grasp, came clanging down against the hard earth floor. Lod grunted; O'Leary scrambled down, reached, brought up the axe. It was heavy, awkward, too long by a yard. The broad steel head was red with fine rust, twelve inches wide at each blade, two feet from edge to edge, set in a notch in the wood and wrapped with leather strips.

"Haste, small man!" the thin voice screeched.

Lod's eyes flew open. He stared blankly, then shook his head, muttering. His gaze fell on O'Leary as the latter gripped the axe at mid-point, brought it up across his shoulder. Lod roared, tried to rise, slipped, fell back, bellowing—

With a heave, O'Leary lifted the axe from his shoulder, swung it up, took two steps, brought it over and down with all the force of his arms behind it, square on the juncture of Lod's neck and chest. The great head leaped up six inches, like a grotesque beach-ball balanced on a spurting column of crimson; then it fell aside, bounced once on the massive shoulder, struck the floor with a meaty thud, spun, came to a stop staring up at O'Leary with a hideous leer.

In the chair, the great body, still fountaining blood, rose unsteadily to its feet.

"Now I am master," the tiny head croaked.

Then the body toppled—dead.

O'Leary groped to the table, feeling blackness closing in; he found the ale-jug with his hands, tilted it, drank, then leaned on the table and waited while the cool liquid burned away the fog. There was food here—a feast fit for a giant. He sank down on a stool, picked up a roast pigeon, fell to, oblivious of the immense body lying at his feet in a spreading pool of tar-black blood.

After eating, O'Leary pulled off his shirt examined his wounds. He was cut, slashed, scraped in fifty places. None of the cuts was deep, but he'd look like a school-girl's embroidery project when the doctors finished

stitching him up. Using a little of the ale, he cleaned the slashes, wincing at the sting, wiped away the drying blood, then tore strips from Lod's voluminous scarf to bind up the worst cuts. He went to the door, listened. There was no sound from outside. Was Crusher or another of Lod's bulky bodyguards standing by, awaiting a summons? He needed a weapon. There were plenty of them on the wall, but all were broken—war trophies, taken from fallen enemies, Lod had boasted. The axe was too big to be handy, but it would have to do—and maybe its bloody condition would impress the locals. He hefted it, got it across his shoulder, flung the door open. There was no one in sight in the dark tunnel.

The rough-hewn passage led upward at a slant, angled around a massive reinforced concrete footing, ended at a crude doorway hacked in the ceramic tile cellar wall and covered by an untanned hide of some scaly animal. O'Leary thrust it aside, emerged into a gloomy basement crowded with vast air-conditioner and furnace units, festooned with aluminum-wrapped duct-work, piping, and heavy electrical cables. At one side, a 50 KW diesel generator chugged patiently—the source of the remaining electric power in the hotel, O'Leary deduced.

He crossed the wide room, went

up stairs, came out into unused kitchens, foul with a faint odor of rotted food. Windows at the far side showed the grey light of early dawn. They were sealed shut, he saw. Still, there was no point in venturing out into the frequented area of the building. His mission now was merely escape, and return to the capital as quickly as his pet dragon could canter. Nicodaeus had been clever, tricking him into setting off on a wild goose chase while he completed his plans for seizure of the kingdom undisturbed. Lod had said that the plotter planned to dispose of Adoranne. If he had hurt her—

Time to think about that later. O'Leary swung the axe at the window. Glass burst outward. He knocked free the jagged shards remaining in the frame, stepped up on a table, ducked through to a wide stone sill, jumped down to the untrimmed turf six feet below. So far so good. Now, where was his mount? He gave a low, Trigger-style whistle. There was an answering hiss from beyond the nearest clump of trees only dimly visible through the early-morning fog. O'Leary set off in that direction, saw the stir of a tall body among the trunks. A mighty figure stalked forth to meet him, looking bigger than ever through the mist.

"That's the boy, right on the

job," O'Leary called in a low voice, trotting forward to meet the tremendous beast as it advanced, emitting a rumble like a dormant volcano stirring to life. O'Leary admired the play of the massive thigh muscles under the greenish hide, the great column of the neck, the jaws—

Jaws? He didn't remember a head the size of a Volkswagen, opening like a vast power shovel to reveal multiple rows of gleaming ivory daggers—nor did he recall red eyes, pinning him down like spears, or talons like curved bone scimitars—

He turned, dropped the cumbersome axe, dashed for shelter. A huge foot struck the earth just beside him; something immense swooped down, and O'Leary caught a glimpse of a steaming red-lined cavern big enough to stable a pony. He dived; there was a tremendous boom! as the jaws met inches behind him. Then a blow sent him spinning. He rolled over, came to hands and knees, his shirt in shreds, saw the strange dinosaur whirl, a tatter of cloth dangling from its teeth, come prancing back, jaws ready for a second try. O'Leary backed, met the solid resistance of thick-growing shrubbery—

With a crash of rending branches, a second, smaller reptile stepped into view. Dinny! The herbivore took two steps into the

clear. The meat-eater bellowed. Dinny gave a leap, apparently saw the allosaurus for the first time, bleated, took three hasty steps backward, turned and made for cover.

"Smart dinosaur," O'Leary muttered. He readied himself for a desperate sprint as the carnivore veered in his charge, plunged after the tame saurian, jaws gaping even wider. A few yards in the lead, the iguanodon skidded to a halt, rocked forward, swept his heavy fleshy tail to one side, brought it around in a swipe that caught the meat-eater solidly across the knees. The Tyrannosaurus stumbled, crashed through a screen of trees in a tangle of broken boughs and trailing vines, and went down out of sight with an impact like a falling skyscraper. There was one terrific blast of sound, like a calliope gone mad. The unbelievable legs kicked out, subsided to a regular twitching shudder, then were still. O'Leary tottered across the patch of lawn, peered through the fallen foliage; the spearheads of the steel fence across which the monster had fallen protruded through the massive neck. O'Leary stooped, recovered his axe.

"Nice placement, boy," O'Leary said.

"Now let's saddle up and ride—and let's hope we're not too late."

Two hours' ride into the desert, O'Leary shaded his eyes, watching a moving caterpillar of dust approaching, miles away across the parched sands. If this was Hamid and the Elect, there might be more trouble—not that he had anything to worry about, with even a small dinosaur on his side. Or maybe it was Nicodaeus, on his way to have it out with his erstwhile ally, Lod.

The sun was subsiding. O'Leary saw that the column had halted. Men on horseback were milling, fanning out. One or two deserters or couriers, had-turned, were cutting trails back toward the distant faint line of green that marked the desert's edge, fifteen miles away. Now a single horseman spurred forward, riding out alone in advance of the deployed troop. O'Leary slowed his mount to a walk. The lone rider was a tall man, buckled into black armor, a long sword slapping at his side, a long lance in its rest. A hundred yards distant he reined in his handsome black charger, and O'Leary saw the black hair and clean-cut features of Count Alain. The count raised a gauntleted hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"As I expected, the traitor, Sir Lafayette," he shouted. "I warned the king you were in Lod's pay, but he seemed to find the suggestion amusing."

"I don't blame him; it's a very

funny idea," O'Leary called back. "What are you doing out here in the desert?"

"I've come with a hundred loyal men to demand the return of Her Highness, unharmed. Will you yield now, villain, or must we attack?"

"Well that's very nobly spoken, Al," O'Leary said. "And I admire your nerve in facing up to Dinny here. But I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong dinosaur. I don't have Adoranne—"

"Then your master, the unspeakable Lod—"

"He's not my master, Alain. I've just—"

"You deny it? Here in the rebel's home ground—riding his fabled dragon—"

"Certainly I deny it! I came out here looking for Adoranne, the same as you—"

"Don't waste your breath! You expect me to believe your fanciful tales?"

"I don't much care whether you believe me or not, except that we'd probably accomplish more as allies than competitors. Lod is no pal of mine; in fact, he's not anybody's pal now. I killed him."

"You? Ha! I'm laughing!"

O'Leary held up the bloodied axe. "Then laugh this off. But let's cut the chatter. Adoranne isn't back there; she never was. Nicodaeus is the man we want.

He's plotting to take over the kingdom. He had a deal with Lod, but it seems he's decided he doesn't need him anymore; so he double-crossed him, and instead of delivering Her Highness to him as a consolation prize, he intends to do away with her—"

"Lies!" Alain shouted, rising in his stirrups and shaking a mailed fist. "You're trying to drag red herrings across the trail—but if you think I'm fool enough to swallow that tale—"

"It's the truth! I'm on my way to Artesia to find Nicodaeus now! Why don't you join forces with me, and—"

"Bah! If you think it's that easy to divert me from the path of duty, you know little of the loyalty of the subjects of His Majesty—"

"Go ahead—see for yourself. You'll find Lod in his private interrogation room, at the end of a tunnel from the cellar under the kitchens. He had fifty or more thugs hanging around the place, so be careful. Don't worry about his dragon, though: Dinny here killed it."

"You take me for an idiot? You're perched on the monster's skull at this moment, in living testimony to your false alliance!"

"OK. I can't wait around. I've got to get to the capital before it's too late. Too bad you can't see your way clear to join me." O'Leary kicked his heels against

the saurian's skull; it obediently started forward. Alain spurred aside, watched as O'Leary rode past.

"First I ride to the rescue of her Highness," he shouted. "Then I come to settle accounts with you, Sir Lafayette!"

"I'll be waiting for you. Ta-ta." O'Leary waved, then settled down for the long ride ahead.

The sun was high when he crossed the cactus-grown borderland and rode down the last slope into the green countryside of Artesia. News of his approach had spread ahead of him; his fifteen-foot tall mount would have been visible for the last quarter-hour as it tramped across the sandy waste. The road was deserted now; shops stood empty, the windows of the houses along the way were shuttered tight. O'Leary's cuts and bruises were aching abominably, and his reflections were gloomy. By agreeing with his theory that Lod was the abductor, Nicodaeus had neatly set one nuisance against another, with a chance that O'Leary and the giant might manage to destroy each other. The magician had been a plausible scoundrel; poor king Goruble had given the schemer quarters right in the palace, where he could carry out his plot with the greatest convenience. The plan had been well worked out, O'Leary con-

ceded; and only luck had given him this chance to thwart the would-be usurper—if he wasn't already too late.

He entered the suburbs—the collection of squatters' huts and merchants' stalls clustered outside the city wall proper; all was silent, the narrow alleys empty. A damned shame he couldn't find someone to spread the word that he was on their side, that he needed their help now in his attack on Nicodaeus. No telling what the magician might have rigged in the way of defenses. There might be a battery of artillery waiting inside the palace walls. Well, if so, that was just a risk he'd have to run.

The city gates just ahead were closed tight. From his perch, O'Leary could see over the wall into empty streets beyond. Well, if they wouldn't let him in, he'd have to make his own way. He urged Dinny ahead; the saurian balked, sidled, then turned lashed out with its tail. A twenty-foot section of the ancient wall went over with a crash and rumble of falling masonry. The dinosaur picked its way delicately through the rubble into the street of shuttered shops. Far away, O'Leary heard the sound of a church bell tolling out a warning. Except for that, and the scrape and clack of the iguanodon's horny bird feet on the cobbles, the city was silent as death.

The palace gates were shut, O'Leary saw as he rode up the avenue leading through the park toward the high iron grills. Two frightened-looking sentries stood their ground inside the wall, nervously fingering blunderbusses. One raised his weapon as O'Leary halted fifty yards from the gates.

"Don't shoot," he called, "I'm—"

There was a loud boom! and a jet of black smoke spurted from the flared muzzle of the gun. O'Leary heard a sharp whack! against the dinosaur's hide. The latter turned his head casually, cropped a bale of leaves from an arching branch.

"Listen to me!" Lafayette tried again. "I've just escaped from Lod's fortress, and—"

The second guard fired; O'Leary heard the ball shriek past his head.

"Hey!" he yelled. "That could be dangerous! Why don't you listen to what I've got to say before you make a serious error?"

Both men threw their guns aside and bolted.

"Oh, well, I guess it's what you'd expect," O'Leary muttered. "All right, boy, here we go again." He urged the dinosaur forward; it stalked up to the gates, leaned on them, trampled them down without slowing, continued along the wide graveled drive. Ahead the palace loomed, win-

dows a-glitter in the afternoon sun, silent. A movement caught O'Leary's eye at the top of one of the towers. He turned toward it across the lawn, waved an arm.

"Hello in there!" he shouted. "It's me, Lafayette O'Leary—"

All along the parapets, from the castellated tops of towers, from the archer's slits set in the stone walls, arrows sprang, arching up in sibilant flight, converging, dropping—

O'Leary ducked, closed his eyes and gritted his teeth; an arrow clacked off Dinny's snout, inches from his boot-tip. Something plucked at his torn left sleeve. Other darts clattered down, glancing from the dino's tough hide, bouncing off to fall in the grass. Then silence. He opened an eye; ranks of men were in view at the ramparts now, fitting new bolts to strings, bending bows.

"Let's get out of here, Dinny!" O'Leary dug in his heels; the big reptile started forward as a second flight of arrows swept past to thud into the turf and rattle off the iguanodon's trailing tail. The balustraded grand entry was just ahead. The dinosaur took the graceful flight of wide steps at a stride, halted at O'Leary's command.

"No use knocking the wall down," he panted, sliding down to the smooth tiles of the ter-

race as Dinny lowered his head to investigate the geranium boxes along its edge. "You wait here."

Still carrying Lod's axe, O'Leary ran to the wide glass doors—less substantial than the oak panels opening from the courtyard side, he noted gratefully—kicked them in, stepped in past a statue in white marble of a nude lady with wings. The great hall echoed his steps. Somewhere in the distance he could hear a hoarse voice yelling commands. Those archers at the battlements would be arriving on the scene at any moment—and at close range, they could hardly miss. It would be a good idea to get out of sight—fast.

The entrance from the great hall to the secret passage system was on the far side, he remembered; about there, where the tall mirrors reflected gilt ceilings and a vast crystal chandelier. Feet were clattering above now. O'Leary ran for it, reached the wall, felt quickly over it. To the left? No, more to the right. There was a loud yell from above; O'Leary looked up, saw a beefy-faced Household Guardsman with three wide yellow stripes on his sleeve leaning over a gallery rail, pointing. More men crowded up behind him. Bows appeared, and muskets. O'Leary searched frantically. He had seen the chandelier when Yockabump had opened the panel for him to peek out—

he remembered that. And the fountain there—

A section of wall slid aside just as the roar of a shot boomed through the hall. A bullet smacked the wall above his head. Bowstrings twanged and an arrow struck the wall beside him as he ducked, stepped inside, handed the axe in behind him. A second arrow shot between his knees, thumped into the wall inside the passage. O'Leary slammed the panel, heard half a dozen hammerblows as more bolts struck, just an instant late. He leaned against the rough brickwork and let out a long sigh. So far so good. Now for Nicodaeus.

The heavy door to the tower room was closed silent as O'Leary stood before it, listening. From below, he could hear shouts ringing back and forth as the agitated guardsmen scurried about, looking for the lost trail. They might start up the stairs below at any moment, and if they cornered him here, it was all over. An axe wasn't much good against guns and bows. He hammered on the door.

"Let me in, Nicodaeus," he called in a low voice, then put his ear to the panel. There might have been a faint rustle from within.

"Open up or I'll knock the door down!" This time he was sure; there was a soft thump from

beyond the door. Perhaps there was another passage, one Yockabump hadn't known about; maybe the magician was making a back-door escape while he stood here like a Fuller Brush man—

O'Leary raised the axe, swung it high—

The door creaked open six inches. There was a hoarse yell as the axe came down against the panel with a crash that slammed the door wide. O'Leary looked past it at Nicodaeus, backed against a table, making gulping motions.

"Dear boy," the magician managed to gasp out. "You startled me—"

O'Leary wrenched the axe from the oak door. "You can skip all that 'dear boy' schmaltz," he said coldly. "I'm a little slow to think unkind thoughts about anybody I've shared a drink with, but in your case I managed. Where is she?"

"Where—where is who?"

"Adoranne. And don't bother with the innocence routine either. I know all about you. Your friend Lod spilled the beans just before I killed him."

"You killed Lod?" Nicodaeus' eyebrows shot up toward his receding hairline.

"With this." O'Leary hefted the axe. "And I'm prepared to use it again, if I have to. Now start talking. Where have you got her stashed? Right here in the palace,

I suppose. It would be easy enough, with all these passages in the walls—"

"You must believe me, Lafayette!" The magician straightened himself. "I know nothing of Her Highness' disappearance—no more than any other—"

O'Leary advanced. "Don't stall; I have no time to waste. Talk fast, or I'll hack you into stew-sized chunks and find her myself. I know the back routes pretty well."

"Lafayette, you're making a mistake! I don't know what the rebel, Lod, said of me, but—"

"Never mind what he said. What about the way the cops pounced five minutes after I came into your inner sanctum here, looking for help, a couple evenings ago?"

"But-but—I had nothing to do with it! It was a routine search, I suppose—"

"Uh-huh; just a coincidence—"

"Lafayette! I didn't have time to summon the guard, even if I'd wanted to—and they couldn't have responded that quickly if I had—"

"Well, I managed to get by them. Better start talking now; last chance...."

Nicodæus backed. "Lafayette, I never betrayed you, I swear it! True, I was a trifle uncertain of you at first; but as soon as I satisfied myself—"

"I guess you had nothing to

do with framing me with that silly episode in Adoranne's boudoir, either—to get me out of the way, so you could carry on with your schemes, unmolested!"

"Of course not! I was as amazed as you—"

"And I should just disregard what Lod said about your plans—"

"Lafayette, I did, I admit, approach Lod on one occasion, but only in an effort to learn certain facts; I offered to, ah, grant him certain compensations if he would tell me all he knew of, well, certain matters...." Nicodæus's face was damp, his eyes bugging slightly as they followed the glint of light on the brown-crusted edge of the axe in O'Leary's hands.

"Uh-huh; certain compensations—like Adoranne."

"No!" the magician yelped. "Did he say that? In his own crude way, Lod was a man of directness, not guile. Surely he didn't accuse me of such an act!"

"Well...." O'Leary went back over the conversation with Lod. "He called you a traitor—and he accused me of being your agent—"

"But the other—did he say that I had promised him the person of Her Highness?"

He kept babbling about the plotter in the palace—how you were out to seize the throne, and do away with Adoranne—"

"The plotter in the palace?" Nicodaeus frowned. "It wasn't *me* he was talking about, dear lad—I promise you that. What else did he say?"

He said you didn't need him any more, so you were welching on your promises—"

"Lafayette, I made the giant a promise—this I admit. But it was only if he would tell me all he knows of—of the matter I spoke of—that I would confirm him in his local power, and see to it that he received a reward in cash—an offer which he promised to consider. But as for the talk of thrones, and murder—"

"Get specific, Nicodaeus! What were these certain matters?"

"I'm...not at liberty to say—"

"All right, play it mysterious then. But if you think I'm going to let you talk your way out of this...." O'Leary advanced, bringing the axe up—

"Stop!" Nicodaeus raised both hands. "I'll tell you, Lafayette! But I'm warning you, it's a gross violation of security!"

"Make it good!" O'Leary waited, axe ready.

"I'm a...a representative of an organization of vast importance, a secret operative, you might say. I was assigned here to investigate certain irregularities—"

"Don't lapse back into vagaries!"

"Very well; I was sent here by

Central. There was the matter of a highly localized Probability Stress. The case had been in the docket for some years, what with the case-load, and I was sent to clear it up—"

"Not very good," O'Leary said, shaking his head. "Not very convincing. Try again."

"Look...." Nicodaeus groped inside his flowing robe, brought out a shiny shield-shaped object. "My badge," he said. "And if you'll let me get my lock-box, I'll show you my full credentials...."

O'Leary leaned forward to look at the badge. There was a large 7-8-6 engraved in its center on a stylized representation of what appeared to be an onion. Around the edge O'Leary spelled out: SUB-INSPECTOR OF CONTINUATION

He frowned at the older man, lowered the axe reluctantly. "What does that mean?"

"One of the jobs of Central is seeking out and neutralizing unauthorized stresses in the probability fabric. They can cause untold damage to the orderly progress of entropic evolution—"

O'Leary hefted the axe. "That's over my head. Tell me in simple language what this is all about."

"I'll try, Lafayette—not that I'm at all sure I know myself. It seems that this coordinate level—this, ah, um universe? Di-

mension? Aspect of multi-ordinate reality...?"

"You mean world?" O'Leary waved a hand to encompass all of Artesia.

"Precisely! Very well put. But as I was saying this world was the scene, some decades ago, of a Probability Trauma, resulting in a permanent stress in the continuum. Naturally this required clearing up, since all sorts of untoward events can occur along the stress-line, particularly where matter displacement has occurred—"

"OK, let's skip over that. I'd say you were nutty as a pecan roll except for a few things that have happened to me lately. Too bad we don't have more time to discuss it. But what's that got to do with Adoranne?"

"I was merely attempting to establish my *bonafides*, dear boy. Some sort of skulduggery took place here twenty or thirty years ago; the situation still remains unresolved. It's my job to find the center of the stress pattern, restore all anachronies and extra-continual phenomena to their normal space-time-serial niches, and thus eliminate the anomaly. But I confess I've made no progress. The center is here—nearby. At one time, I even suspected you, Lafayette—after all, you appeared under rather mysterious circumstances—but, of course, you checked out as clean

as a scrublady's knees." He smiled glassily.

"What do you mean, checked out?"

"I took readings on you when I visited you in your room, before the ball. The lighter, you know. You gave a neutral indication, of course. You see, only an outsider—a person native to another continuum would elicit a positive indication. Since you're a native, you gave no such reading."

"Mmmmmm. You'd better have your dials checked. But look—this isn't finding Adoranne. I was sure you had her. If not...." O'Leary looked at Nicodaeus feeling suddenly helpless. "Who does?"

Nicodaeus stroked his chin. "You say Lod spoke of 'the plotter in the palace,'...". Did he give you any further details?

"No. I wasn't paying much attention; I thought he meant you. He was pretty drunk, but still cagey enough not to mention the name."

"Who would gain by the disappearance of Her Highness? Someone with ambitions of usurpation, someone close to the throne, someone unsuspected," Nicodaeus mused. "Could it be one of Goruble's painted dandies?"

"Lod is the one who had his eye on the throne—and a yen for Adoranne, too. Maybe Alain—

but somehow he strikes me as honest, in his blundering way. Then there's you—but for some reason I believe your story. But I'd still like to know who spread the word that I'd been here. They were staked out at the city gates, waiting for me. Are you sure you didn't spill the beans?"

"I assure you, I was discretion itself. Even King Goruble...." Nicodaeus paused, looking thoughtful.

"What about Goruble?" O'Leary said sharply.

"I had a few words with his Majesty, just after you were here. He questioned me closely. I wondered at the time what he was hinting at; he appeared to suspect I'd been shielding you...."

"Did you tell him I'd been here?"

"No...and yet, now that you mention it, he seemed to know. . ." Nicodaeus' eyes were round. "Great heavens, Lafayette! Do you suppose—? But how could it be? I've been looking for someone, an outsider—but the king—"

"Lod said someone who *wanted* to take over the throne; Goruble already has it."

Nicodaeus frowned. "In these cases there's usually some individual—often a renegade Agent of Central, I confess—who sees his chance to establish himself comfortably in a sub-technical environment and make himself

dictator, to which Central would have no particular objection, if it weren't for the resultant chain of anomalies—but it never occurred to me—"

"...that he'd already taken over," O'Leary finished for him. "I don't know much about the history of Artesia, but from a few hints dropped here and there, I've gotten the impression King Goruble is far from beloved—and that he came to power some twenty-odd years ago under rather vague circumstances."

"I've been blind!" Nicodaeus exclaimed. "I've never tested him, of course; who would have suspected the king? But it fits, Lafayette! It fits! He had the opportunity—he could walk into the princess's apartment without an alarm, lure her away—then presto—pop her into a locked room, and raise the outcry!"

"But what for? She's his niece—"

"Not if our theory is correct, lad! He's an outsider—an interloper—a usurper, with no more claim to the throne than you! And Adoranne, as the niece of the previous king, represents a very real threat to his security—particularly since he is himself unpopular, while the masses adore the princess!"

"Then *he* was the one who was doing business with Lod—the plotter in the palace!" O'Leary nibbled his lip. "But—hold it,

Nicodaeus. There's one big flaw in the picture: Lod— from what I could guess—was brought in from. . .somewhere else. One of these other continua of yours, I'd say. The same goes for that dinosaur he kept in his front yard. And his HQ itself—it looked like something that had been plucked up by the roots and dumped in the desert for Lod's use. The plotter we're looking for was using Lod as a diversion, to keep the people's minds off his own power-grab—and the fancy quarters and the personal dragon were part of the bargain. But the only one around here with outside resources—is *you!*"

"Me? But Lafayette! I'm an Inspector! I can't go moving buildings and tyrannosauri about at will! My workshop here suffices for a few modest surveillance instruments, nothing more! You're forgetting that our culprit was himself an outsider! If he transported himself here, why couldn't he have manipulated the rest?"

"You're still holding out on me, Nicodaeus. What about your *real* workshop? I saw some pretty big machines down there; they aren't just for checking your suspects' vibrations—"

"Real workshop? I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Lafayette."

"In the cellar—the big room with the iron door and the

smaller room that looks like a walk-in refrigerator—"

"Like...like...?" Nicodaeus' eyes bugged. "Lafayette—did you say—walk-in refrigerator?"

"Yes, and—"

"With a large door—with a big latch mechanism, like this?" He sketched in the air.

"Right. What's it for?"

Nicodaeus groaned. "I fear, Lafayette, we'll not see Adoranne again. The device you describe is a Traveller—used to transport small cargoes from one coordinate level to another. I was dropped here in one, and expect, in due course, to be picked up by another. If Goruble had one here—a stolen vehicle belonging to Central, no doubt—then I fear Adoranne is already beyond our reach."

"You really think Goruble's our man?"

"None other. Alas, Lafayette, she was such a charming girl—"

"Maybe it's not too late," O'Leary snapped. "Come on; we'll pay a call on his majesty—" and this time I won't be bluffing!"

The red-faced sergeant of the guard spotted them as they stepped off the main stairway at the third floor.

He gave a yell and dashed up, bringing his gun around.

"Hold, my man!" Nicodaeus called. "I'm taking Sir Lafayette

to interview His Majesty on a matter concerning the security of the realm! Kindly fall your men in as an honor guard!"

"Honor guard?" The non-com raised his musket threateningly. "I'll honor guard the louse, kidnapping our princess—"

"I didn't," O'Leary cut in. "But I think I know who did. If you want to shoot me before I can tell, go ahead."

The sergeant hesitated. "Better lay down that axe, Buster. Drop it right there."

"I'm keeping it," O'Leary said shortly. "Come with us or stay here, I don't care which, but don't get in my way." He turned, strode off toward the royal quarters. Behind him, there was a moment of hesitation, then a curse and a snapped order to fall in. A moment later the ten-man detail closed in around Lafayette and Nicodaeus, guns ready, eyes rolling ominously at the pair.

"Better not try nothing," the nearest man muttered. "I got a yen to clear my barrel."

O'Leary halted at the door to the King's chambers, ignoring the two gaping sentries, tried the elaborate gold knob, pushed the door wide.

"Hey, you can't—" someone started.

"All right, Goruble, come on out!" O'Leary called. He looked around at cloth-of-gold hangings, high windows, rich rugs, spindle-

legged furniture with the gleam of rare wood. The room was empty. He walked across to an inner door, threw it wide; it was an ornate bath, with a sunken tub, flower boxes, mirrors, all with gold fittings.

"Wow, a solid gold john," a guard oohed.

The next door let into a vast bedroom with a canopied bed looking like a galleon under full sail. O'Leary checked two more rooms, Nicodaeus at his side, the troop of soldiers following, silent, awed by this rude invasion of the royal privacy.

"He's not here," Nicodaeus said as O'Leary prodded the hanging clothes in the closet of the last room.

"But—he's got to be here," a guardsman said. "He couldn'a left without we knew about it; after all, we're the royal body-guard—"

"I think I might know where he went," O'Leary said. "I'll go check—"

"You ain't going no place, Bud." The sergeant stepped forward to assert his damaged authority. "I'm taking you down to the dungeons, and when His Majesty shows up—"

"Sorry—no time." O'Leary brought the butt of the axe up in a swipe from the floor, caught the sergeant under the third button; he ouffed and doubled over. O'Leary tossed the axe, handle-

first, at the man behind him, straight-armed the next, ran for the door, whirled and slammed it behind him. There were shouts and loud thuds as he turned the key in the lock. In three jumps he was across the room, pulling aside the drapes that framed a portrait of the king as a frowning youth. He slapped panels; a section of wall tilted outward; he slipped through, clicked it shut behind him, turned—and froze at a scraping sound from the darkness.

"Nice footwork, O'Leary," the cavernous voice of Yockabump said. "I kind of figured you'd be taking to the woodwork soon. Where you headed?"

"I'm glad you're here," O'Leary said tensely. "You remember the rooms in the cellar? The ones with all the big machines?"

"Oh, you mean old Goruble's thinking rooms. Sure. What about 'em?"

"I need to get down there—fast!"

"Maybe you better stay clear o' that section for a while; the old boy himself walked right past me in the dark, not an hour ago, headed in the same direction. From the look on his face, I'd say he was in a lousy mood."

"An hour ago? Then maybe there's a chance! Come on, Yockabump! Lead the way as fast as you can and hope it's fast enough!"

The polished slab door was closed tight as O'Leary came softly up to it, his tread muffled by the carpet of dust in the narrow passage.

"He's still in there," Yockabump whispered, a sound like a dynamo growling to a halt. "His footprints go in, and don't come out."

"You must have eyes like a cat," O'Leary said. "It's all I can do to see where I'm going." He put his ear to the door.

Silence.

O'Leary narrowed his eyes. There was a keyhole, just there, near the edge, he told himself; a small inconspicuous aperture—and the key—it would be hanging from a nail on the beam, there, unseen in the darkness. *It had to be there....*

There was the faintest of bumps in the smooth flow of the time-stream. O'Leary smiled grimly, groped over the rough-hewn member, found the tiny key.

"Hey, O'Leary!" Yockabump rumbled. "How'd you know that was there?"

"I, ah, saw it." He fitted it quietly into the door.

"But you said—"

Shhhh." O'Leary turned the key; there was a tiny click. He leaned against the door; it swung silently inward, revealing the dim-lit interior of the room, the massed dials and indicator lights,

the tall shapes of the massive equipment housing the festooned conduits and—in the center of the room, King Goruble, seated in a chair, holding a compactly-built machine gun across his knees, aimed at O'Leary's chest.

"Come right in, Sir Lafayette," Goruble said grimly. "I've been awaiting you."

CHAPTER XIV

O'Leary gauged the distance to the rotund monarch. If he jumped to one side, then hit him low—

"I wouldn't recommend it; I'm quite adept at the use of fire-arms. Come away from the door. I don't want you to be tempted. Just take a chair there...." The king nodded to a seat beside the panel.

O'Leary moved across, sat down gingerly, his legs under him, ready to move fast when the moment came.

"You look a trifle uncomfortable," Goruble said, in a hard tone unlike the easy-going air of more-or-less benign confusion that had earlier characterized him. "Just lean back, if you please, and stretch your legs well out before you. That way I think you'll be less likely to attempt something foolish."

Again O'Leary followed the crisp orders. This was a new Goruble; the theories that had

seemed farfetched minutes before were taking on a new plausibility. The small eyes that stared at him now were those of a man capable of anything.

"Where's Adoranne?" O'Leary said abruptly.

"Speak when spoken to," Goruble said harshly. "There are a few facts I want from you—before I make disposition of you."

"With that?" O'Leary glanced at the aimed gun.

"Nothing so gory—unless you force me to, of course, in which case I can put up with the inconvenience. No, I'll merely remove you to a place where you can cause no trouble."

"And what place would that be?" O'Leary showed the king a small, challenging smile.

"Don't bother your head about that," Goruble said coldly. "Now, tell me how much you know. And don't hold back. I'm prepared to deal fairly with you. If I find you grudging, I'll consign you to a certain small island I know of—capable of sustaining life, but not offering much in the way of amusements. But for each fact you confide in me, I'll add another amenity to your exile."

"I think I know the place you mean," O'Leary said. "But I didn't like it there, so I left—if you'll recall." He watched the stout ruler for a reaction to the shot in the dark. Goruble's mouth twitched in a frown.

"This time you'll have no confederate to snatch you back. Now, kindly start your recital. How much is known at Central?"

O'Leary considered and rejected a number of snappy answers. "Enough," he said after a momentary pause.

"You, I take it, are fully in the confidence of Nicodaeus. How did he discover your identity?"

"I told him," O'Leary hazarded.

"Ah." Goruble looked crafty. "And how did *you* discover your identity?"

"Someone told me," O'Leary replied promptly.

Goruble's brow furrowed. "Speak plainly!" he rapped. "Tell me all you know!"

O'Leary said nothing.

"I suggest you discover your tongue at once," Goruble snapped, "Remember, I have it in my power to make it highly uncomfortable for you—or, on the other hand, to leave you in a situation of comparative ease."

O'Leary was studying the half-open door to a cabinet on the wall behind the king. If there should be a small glass container lying just inside—and if it should be on its side, ready to roll out—and if there should be just the slightest jar—such as a sneeze...

"Surely you're not childish enough to imagine that you can distract me by eyeing some imaginary intruder behind me," Goruble smiled sourly, "I'm...."

His nose twitched. "I'm far too . . . tooo. . . ." He drew a sharp breath, blasted it out in a titanic sneeze, then grabbed for the gun, brought it back on target.

"It requires bore thad a bere sdeeze to distragd be." He fumbled for a handkerchief in his breast pocket. "I'm quide accustomed to the dust in these unused ways—"

There was a soft creak as the cabinet door moved in the faint gust of air stirred up by Goruble's explosion; light glinted for an instant on something on the dark shelf; and eight-ounce beaker rolled into view, dropped—

At the startlingly loud impact of glass against concrete, Goruble leaped a clear twelve inches from the chair; the gun went off with a shattering roar, stitched a row of craters across the floor, blasted tufts of cotton from the chair seat as O'Leary dived from it, slammed Goruble aside with a shoulder. He snatched the gun as it flew from his hands and whirled, centered the sights on the monarch's paunch.

"Nice weapon," he said. "I'll bet a few of these made a lot of difference, back when you were stealing the throne."

Goruble made an unpleasant, snarling noise.

"Sit down over there," O'Leary ordered. "Now, let's cut the chatter. Where's Adoranne?" He was fingering the unfamiliar stock of

the weapon, wondering which projecting button was the trigger. If Goruble had another gun stashed and went for it now....

"Look here, you utter fool," Goruble snapped. "You don't know what you're doing—"

"You wanted facts," Lafayette cut him off. Here are a few: You're sitting on somebody else's throne. You've kidnapped Her Highness—who isn't your niece, by the way—because she's a potential threat to you. You brought Lod in from Outside, and his pet lizard, too. Unfortunately, I had to kill both of them—"

"You—" Goruble started—and dropped flat as O'Leary's questing finger touched a concave button on the breech of the gun and sent a round screeching past the king's ear to blast a pocket in the stone wall.

"Just a warning shot," O'Leary said hastily. "Now, open up, Goruble. Where is she?"

The king couched on all fours; he was looking badly shaken now, his jowls had lost their usual high color.

"Now, now, don't lose your head," he babbled, coming shakily to his feet. "I'll tell you what you want to know. As a matter of fact, I'd intended all along to propose an arrangement with you . . ." He slapped at the dust on his velvet doublet. "You didn't think I intended to hog it all, did you, my dear fellow? I mere-

ly wished to, ah, consolidate the improvements I've made, before summoning you—that is, inviting you—or—"

"Get to the point. Where is she?"

"Safe!" Goruble said hastily.

"If she's not, I'll blow your head off!"

"I assure you she's well! After all, *you* suffered no harm, eh? I'm not bloodthirsty, you know. The, ah, earlier incident was just an unfortunate accident, believe me."

O'Leary raised his eyebrows. "Tell me about the accident."

Goruble spread his hands. "It was the purest misfortune. I had come to his chambers late one evening, with a proposal—a perfectly reasonable proposal—"

"By 'his,' I suppose you mean your predecessor?"

"My, ah, yes, my predecessor. Hot-tempered man, you know. He had no reason to fly into a pet. After all, with my, ah, special resources, the contribution I would make would be well worth the consideration I sought. But he chose instead to pretend that I had insulted him—as though an offer of honorable marriage to his sister could be anything but an honor to the primitive—that is, underdeveloped—or—"

"Get on with it."

"I was a bit put out, of course; I spoke up frankly. He attempted to strike me. There was a struggle;

in those days, I was a rather powerful man. He fell. . . ."

"Hit his head, I suppose?"

"No—there was a sword—his own, of course—and somehow, in the excitement, he became, er, impaled. Through the heart. Dead, you know. Nothing I could do." Goruble was sweating now. He sank down in the bullet-pocked chair, dabbing at his temples with a lace hanky. "I was in an awkward spot. I could hardly be expected to summon the guard and tell them what had happened. The only course open to me was . . . to dispose of the body. I brought it down through the inner passage, and, ah, sent it away. Then what? I racked my brain, but I could evolve only one scheme: to assume supreme authority—temporary, of course—until such time as more, ah, regular arrangements could be made. I made certain preparations, called in the members of the council, explained the situation, enlisted their support. There were one or two soreheads, of course, but they came around when the realities of their position were explained to them—"

"I get the general idea." O'Leary moved up, pressed the muzzle of the machine gun carelessly against Goruble's third chin.

"Take me to Adoranne—right now. I'll get the rest of your confession later."

Gorable's eyes crossed as he stared down at the cold steel jabbing his throat. "Certainly. The dear child is perfectly well—"

"Don't talk; just show me."

Gorable rose carefully, led the way into the passage. O'Leary glanced both ways, saw no sign of Yockabump. The clown must have discretely fled at the first inkling of the strange doings here in the palace catacombs. Goruble was picking his way in the near-darkness, moving along toward the chamber O'Leary had likened to a walk-in refrigerator. The king fumbled out keys under O'Leary's watchful eye, manipulated locks; the heavy panel swung silently open. Goruble stepped back as bright light gleamed through the widening opening, indicated the interior of the eight-by-ten cubbyhole. O'Leary moved clear of the opening door, took in the dial-covered walls, the console installation like an all-electric kitchen—and at one side, Adoranne, bound hand and foot, gagged with a silken scarf, tied to a gold brocaded easy chair. She tugged frantically at her bonds as she saw O'Leary, her blue eyes wide. She was wearing a pale blue nightgown, he saw, an imaginative garment as substantial as a spiderweb. O'Leary smiled encouragingly at the girl, motioned with the gun at Goruble.

"After you, Your borrowed Majesty," he said. Goruble quickly

stepped through the door, went to Adoranne's chair, skipped behind it, and faced O'Leary.

"There are a few other matters I must mention to you now," he said, looking unaccountably smug.

"Never mind that. Unite her."

Gorable held up a plump hand. "Patience, if you please. I hardly think you dare fire the shatter-gun in such intimate juxtaposition to the object of your anxieties. . . ." He put a palm familiarly on the bare, rounded shoulder of the princess. "And if you should feel impelled to some more animalistic assault, let me point out that the controls are within my easy reach." He nodded to a variety of levers set in the wall to his left. "True, you might manage to halt me—but the danger of ricochets. . . ." He smirked. "I'd suggest you exercise caution," he concluded.

O'Leary looked from Adoranne to the monarch, noting the close-set walls, the nearness to hand of the levers. . . .

"All right," he said between his teeth. "Spit it out."

"The Traveller here—as perhaps you're aware—is a standard utility model. It can place its cargo in a predetermined tricoordinate and return to base setting, requiring a controller at the console, of course. But what you *don't* know is that I have made certain special arrangements, to

fit my, ah, specialized needs here. . . ." The king nodded to a point between himself and O'Leary just outside the half-open door. "If you'd take a step forward—so that I can point out the modifications—ah, that's close enough." he said sharply as O'Leary reached the threshold. "I found it convenient to arrange matters so that I could despatch useful loads to random locations without the necessity for my accompanying them." He pointed to a number of heavy braided copper cables dangling across the panel. "My modifications were crude, perhaps, but effective. I was able to bring the entire area of the corridor there, to a distance of some fifteen feet, well within effective range." He smiled contentedly, reached for a lever. O'Leary jerked the gun up, had a quick mental image of the explosive pellets smacking into Adoranne's soft flesh; he tossed the gun aside, leaped—

—and landed on his face in a drift of powdery snow packed against a rocky wall rising from a galeswept ledge of glittering ice. He gasped as a blast of arctic wind ripped at him; through a blur of pain-tears he saw a small purple sun low in the black sky, a ragged line of ice-peaks. His lungs caught at the thin air—like breathing razor blades. He tried to scramble to his feet; the

wind knocked him down. He stayed low then, rolled, reached the inadequate shelter of a drifted cranny. He wouldn't last long here. There had to be some place to get in out of the cold. . . . He picked a spot ten feet distant, where the rock wall angled sharply. *Just out of sight around that outcropping*, he thought desperately, *there's a door set in the stone. All I have to do is reach it. . . .* He pictured it, built the image, then . . . There! Had he felt the familiar faint thump in the orderly flow of entropy? It was hard to tell, with this gale blasting at him. But it had to be! It must be a hundred below here; the stone at his back and the ice under his hands had burned like hot coals at first; now everything was getting remote, as though he were encased in thick plastic. He forced himself to move, crawled forward, almost went down on his face as the full force of the wind struck him. His hands were like wooden mallets now; he made another yard, skidded back as a particularly vicious gust slammed against him, tried again—and saw the soft yellow light across the snow ahead, a cheery reflection in the ice. He rounded the shoulder of rock; there it was, a glass door in an aluminum frame, a tall rectangle of warmth against the cold and dark. No point in dwelling on the incongruity of it—just reach

it. The latch was just a foot from his hand. He lunged, caught it, felt the door yield, swinging; he fell half through the door into a sea of warmth. He rested a moment, then pulled himself further inside. The door whooshed shut behind him. Soft music was playing. He lay with his cheek against a rug, breathing in short, painful gasps; then he sat up, looked around at oil-rubbed, wood-paneled walls, a built-in bar with gleaming glasses and a silver tray, a framed painting showing colors aswirl on a silvery field. He got to his feet, lurched across to the bar, found a bottle, poured a stiff drink, took it at a gulp.

OK, no time to waste; no time to wonder what sort of place this was or where it was in the Universe; certainly not anywhere on the familiar old planet Earth. He had to get back. Goruble had obviously been ready to travel, just waiting to finish off his enemy before he left. O'Leary closed his eyes, ignoring the throb of returning sensation in his hands and feet and ears, picturing the dark, musty passage under the palace. Adoranne was there she needed him. . . .

There was thump as though the world had grounded on a sand-bar. O'Leary's eyes flew open. He was standing in pitch-darkness, in an odor of dust and mildewed wood. Had he made a mistake. . . ?

"Over this way, Sir Lafayette," a rumbling voice whispered. "Boy, you sure get around."

"Yockabump!" O'Leary groped toward the voice, felt a massive shoulder under his hand at belt-height. "Where is he? I've got to get there before—"

"Wow! Your mitts are like a couple of ice bags!" Yockabump tugged O'Leary forward. "Just around the corner here; there's a door. I was staying out of sight and I couldn't see what was happening, but I heard you yell. Then old Goruble was snickering and talking to himself, and I sneaked a peek. I pretty near jumped him myself when I seen Her Highness, tied to a chair—but then I figured—"

"Then they're still here?"

"Sure. His Majesty's working away like a one-man band, switching wires around. I'm glad you didn't stay away long."

"How did you know where I was?"

"I heard the air sort of whoosh. I noticed that before, when you did the fade from the dungeon—"

"Oh, you were hanging around then, were you?"

"Sure, I like to keep in touch—"

"Shhh." O'Leary pushed through the rough wooden door into the passage he had vacated so precipitously five minutes earlier. He was fifteen feet from the open door to the Traveller—roughly the distance he had

crawled on the ice-ledge. Goruble was peering anxiously at dial faces; in the chair, Adoranne tugged futilely at the bell-cord binding her arms. O'Leary eased out into the passage, started softly forward. He would reach the door, then in one jump, grab Goruble and hustle him away from the controls—

O'Leary's head cracked a low beam in the dark. Goruble looked up sharply at the sound, stood gaping for an instant as O'Leary, half-stunned, staggered toward him; then the usurper whirled, reached as O'Leary jumped—

—Light glared abruptly; something caught at O'Leary's foot, pitched him headlong into a mass of thorny shrubbery. Steamy air redolent of crushed foliage, rotted vegetation, humid soil, and growing things closed around him like a Turkish bath. He fought his way clear of clinging tendrils of rubbery green, ducked as an inch-long insect buzzed his face. Sharp-edged red and green leaves scraped at him. Small flying midges swarmed about him. There was a rasp of scale on bark; a wrist-thick snake of a vivid green hue slid into view on a leafy bough just ahead, raised a wedge-shaped head to stare. Somewhere above, birds were screeching back and forth from the tops of the towering trees.

O'Leary struggled upright, groped for footing in the tangle of fallen greenery. This time he'd fool Goruble: About ten feet in *that* direction, he estimated. The snake was still there, looking him over. He ducked aside from it, crawled over a fallen tree limb, fanned at the swarming insects. About here, he decided. . . .

A movement at the corner of his eye made him whirl. A great striped feline with a bushy yellowish mane was poised in the crotch of a yard-thick tree six feet above O'Leary's head, the green eyes fixed on him like stabbing spears. The jaws parted in a roar that fluttered leaves all around. The cat drew in its hind legs, gathering itself for a leap, roared again and sprang—

O'Leary squeezed his eyes shut, muttered a quick specification, threw himself to one side as the heavy body hurtled past; he slammed an unyielding wall as a tremendous impact sounded behind him, followed by an ear-splitting yell, a ripping of cloth. He staggered upright; he was back—inside the Traveler, just behind Adoranne's chair. The big cat recovered from its first thwarted spring, whirled toward the fleeing figure of Goruble, whose velvet doublet had been split from top to bottom in the first near-miss, revealing a monogrammed silk undershirt. O'Leary caught an instant's glimpse of Yocka-

bump's big-nosed face in the dark passage beyond the king; then Goruble was going down face-first as the attacking predator sailed over him, skidded to a halt, rounded to renew the assault. O'Leary grabbed for the lever Goruble had used, pulled it down as the half-lion, half-tiger bounded across Goruble, sprang for the threshold—and disappeared with a sharp whack! of displaced air.

O'Leary sagged, let out a long sigh. Yockabump waddled to the door, bent to rub his shin.

"The old boy moves pretty good," he said. "I nearly missed. He's down for the count, though."

O'Leary went to Adoranne. "I'll have you loose in a minute." He started in on the knots. Yockabump produced a large clasp-knife, sawed at the heavy cord on her wrists. A moment later she came to her feet, threw herself into O'Leary's arms.

"Oh, Sir Lafayette. . . ." He felt hot tears on the side of his neck, discovered that he was beaming broadly. He patted her silken hip in a comforting way.

"Now, now, Your Highness," he soothed. "It's all over but the singing and dancing."

"Oh—oh, he's coming around." Yockabump indicated the fallen monarch, groaning on the floor.

"Better tie him up," O'Leary suggested. "He's too tricky to let wander around loose."

"By your leave, Sir Lafayette. . . ." The dwarf stepped to Goruble's side, squatted down on bowed legs.

"Ah, there, Your Majesty," he said in a lugubrious tone. "Have you got any last words to say before. . . before. . . ."

"What. . . ." The king gasped. "Where—"

"Just lie quiet, Your Majesty; it's easier that way, they say."

"Easier? Ow, my head. . . ." Goruble tried to sit up. Yockabump pressed him back. "It was the beast, Your Majesty; he got you. Tore your insides out. Don't look. It's too horrible."

"My insides? But—but I don't feel a thing—just my head—"

"A merciful provision of nature. But about those last words; better hurry. . . ."

"Then—it's all over for me?" Goruble slumped back. "Ah, the pity of it, Yockabump. And all because I was too tender-hearted. If I'd done away with the infant—"

"Tender-hearted?" O'Leary cut in. "You killed the king, stole his throne, lived it up for twenty-odd years, then brought in a goon to terrorize your own would-be subjects, gave him a dinosaur to assist in the job, and finally tried to do away with Her Highness. That's tender-hearted?"

"One thing leads to another," Goruble gasped. "As you'll find for yourself. I needed a distrac-

tion; the people were grumbling about taxes and even after all these years, still asking too many questions about the former king's death. They weren't too happy with the story that I was his wandering cousin come home. So I made a number of trips in the Traveller, found Lod living in a cave and brought him here. Then I fetched along that great ugly reptile; it fitted in with the old legend of a dragon. Eventually, of course, I intended to do away with it, and reap the plaudits of the yokels. But the scheme backfired. Lod grew stronger, while I heard the muttering daily grow louder. The people wanted Adoranne—and always there were rumors of the lost prince." He sighed. "And to think that I could have saved all this—if I could merely have brought myself to murder a tot."

"What's a tot got to do with it?"

"Eh? Why, I refer to the infant prince, of course. Exile was the most I could manage. And now see what it's brought me to. . . ."

"You...exiled the little prince?" Adoranne gasped. "You horrid, wicked man! And to think I thought you were my uncle! And all these years, you've known where the lost Crown prince was—"

"No, my dear—I didn't. He was crying in his crib, poor motherless tot— orphaned by my hand, though accidentally. I sent him—"

I didn't know where. But he thrived—ah, all to well. Cosmic justice I suppose. And now—"

"How do you know he thrived?" Adoranne exclaimed.

"Just look at him for yourself," Goruble said. "There he is, standing over me, looking down at me with that accusing expression—"

Adoranne gasped. O'Leary looked to left and right, puzzled. Yockabump nodded his heavy head wisely.

"Now you're seeing visions, eh?" O'Leary commented. "But it's a little late for regrets."

Goruble was staring up at O'Leary. "You mean—you didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"The prince—the child that I sent away, twenty-three years ago—was *you!*"

Beside O'Leary, Adoranne gasped aloud. "Then . . . then you, Sir Lafayette. . . are the right-ful king of Artesia."

"Now, hold on," O'Leary protested. "Are you all crazy? I'm an American—I never saw this place until a week or so ago—"

"I knew you by the ring," Goruble said weakly.

"What ring?" Adoranne asked quickly.

"He wears it on his hand," Goruble said. O'Leary held out his right hand. "You mean this—?"

Adoranne seized his hand, turned the ring to show the de-

vice. "The axe and dragon. The royal signet!" She looked at O'Leary wide-eyed. "Why didn't you show it sooner, Sir Lafayette—your Majesty?"

"He told me to reverse it," Lafayette said. "But—"

"I should have known then that my plans would fail," Goruble went on. "I thought that by casting suspicion on you, I could dispose of you painlessly—"

"Your jail's a long way from painless," O'Leary put in.

"Then you escaped somehow; sterner measures were called for. I employed my specialized remote-control equipment to send you away—how you returned, I still don't know. I followed your progress, and waited here for the show-down, only to have it—alas—end in my defeat, disembowelled by a ravining monster unleashed by my own hand."

"Oh, that," Yockabump called from inside the Traveller, where he was gazing at dials and levers, "that was just a gag, Your ex-Majesty. You're not hurt. On your feet now, and we'll toss you in your own dungeon until your trial comes up."

"Not hurt?" Goruble sat up, felt gingerly over his corpulent frame. "You mean. . . ." His eyes went to the open door to his stolen machine. In an instant, he was on his feet, plunging between O'Leary and Adoranne, dashing for the entry.

Yockabump reached for a lever, waited, threw it just as the fat monarch sprang for the entry. There was a clap of air, and Goruble was gone.

"I hope he lands in the same spot as the cat," the jester said, dusting his hands. "The skunk. Leaves me out of a job, I guess—unless your new Majesty wants to take me on?" He looked hopefully at O'Leary.

"Wait a minute," Lafayette protested. "Adoranne's the heir to the throne! I'm just a guy who wandered into the scene. . . ."

The princess took his arm, looked up at him warmly. "I know a way to solve the dilemma," she said softly. "The whole question will become merely academic if we. . . if I. . . if you. . . ."

"Oh, boy," Yockabump chorled. "Wait'll I spread the word. There's nothing like a royal wedding to cheer everybody up!"

CHAPTER XV

A glittering assemblage filled the ballroom, hanging back shyly from O'Leary in his new eminence.

"As I see it, Lafayette—that is, Your Majesty," Nicodaeus was saying—

"Knock off that 'majesty' stuff," O'Leary said. "Adoranne's the queen. I already told you how I happened to come here—"

"Remarkable," Nicodaeus said,

shaking his head. "Of course, you had a strong natural affinity for this tricoordinate universe, having lived here until the age of two. Odd that you have no recollection of palace life at all."

"It did seem familiar—in a way. But I thought it was just because I'd invented it. And I caught on to the language in a hurry. I guess it was all there, in my subconscious."

"Of course—and when you began consciously striving to break down the inter-plane barriers, it was only natural that you should revert to your natural world or origin, thus cancelling out at last the probability stresses you'd been creating in the other continuum. But I don't think it's ever been done before without equipment. Quite an achievement."

"I still don't see how it works," Lafayette protested. "I just—dreamed it up. How could it be real? *Really* real?"

"It was here all along, Lafayette. Your discontent with your drab existence was an expression of the unconscious yearning toward your native clime. As for your belonging—with all the infinite universes to choose from, surely for every man there must be one where he is king."

"But that doesn't explain how I can invent anything from a bathtub to an iguanodon—and find it waiting just around the next bend."

"You created nothing; those things existed—somewhere. You've merely been manipulating them along lines of weakness in the probability fabric. I'm afraid all that will have to come to an end, however, as soon as I've reported in. We can't have anyone—even yourself, Your Majesty—mucking about with the natural order of things."

O'Leary looked at his watch. "Where's Adoranne?" he enquired. "The party's due to begin any minute now."

She'll be along. Now I have to be going, Lafayette. It's time for my regular Friday evening report." The Inspector of Continua nodded and hurried away. The orchestra was playing what sounded like a Strauss waltz, except that O'Leary had been assured the number had been composed by someone named Cushman Y. Blatz. He stepped through the tall glass doors to the terrace, sniffed the perfume of flowers on the warm night air. Not a bad place at all, this Artesia—king or no king. And with Adoranne as his intended bride—

There was a sudden rush of feet across the lawn below. O'Leary looked around in time to see Count Alain, dust-streaked and grim-faced, leap the balustrade, naked sword in hand. O'Leary dropped his glass with a crash.

"Hey—you startled me—" he started. Alain sprang to him,

jammed the sword point against his new green velvet doublet.

"All right, where is she, you slimy schemer?" he rasped. "One yell, and I'll let you have it. Now speak up—and she'd better be unharmed!"

"Look, you've got the wrong slant on all this," O'Leary protested, backing away. Alain followed relentlessly.

"You're a bold scoundrel," the count snarled. "I take it you've done away with his Majesty—else you'd not be disporting yourself openly,* here on his very terrace!"

"Well, we just sort of, ah, sent him away—"

"And Her Highness!" The sword jabbed harder.

"She's here—she'll be down in a minute! Look, Al old boy, I can explain—"

"As I thought; you had her all along—and I, dolt that I was spent a day and a night on a fool's errand."

"I told you that was a dry run. Did you see what was left of Lod—?"

"When thieves fall out . . .," Alain quoted. "You slew him by a trick, I suppose; but you'll have no chance to trick me—"

There was a sharp cry from the direction of the open doors. O'Leary looked, saw Adoranne standing in the opening, indescribably lovely in a gown of white, with diamonds in her hair.

"Your Highness!" Count Alain said huskily. "You're safe! And as for this wretch. . . ." He tensed his arm, looking O'Leary in the eye—

Adoranne screamed. A dark shadow moved behind Alain; there was a dull clunk! and the young nobelman dropped the sword with a clang, fell against O'Leary, who caught him, let him down on the flagged pavement. The wide figure of the Red Bull stood grinning a vast crooked grin.

"I seen duh slob about tuh ram duh iron to yuh, Bo," he stated. He ducked his red-maned head at Adoranne. "Hi, yer Highness." He tugged at O'Leary's limp arm. "Look, I waited around like yuh said, and the pickins was great." The thick red fingers lifted half a dozen gold watches from a baggy side pocket. "Tanks, pal. You and me make a great team. But look, I got a idear fer a caper dat'll make dis stuff look like chicken feed—"

Adoranne gave a long sigh and sagged against the door-frame. O'Leary jumped to her, caught her slender body, lifted her in his arms.

"She's fainted," he announced, in a cracking voice. "Somebody do something!"

"I got to do a fast fade, Chum," the Red Bull announced. "How's about we ronydvooze at duh Axe and Dragon at midnight Tuesday.

How's about I wear a yellor tulip dis time, OK?" He eased over the balustrade and was gone. People were rushing up now, emitting squeaks as they saw the limp princess.

"I'll take her to her room," O'Leary said. "The poor girl's had a shock." With a fussy chamberlin leading the way and half a dozen ladies-in-waiting clucking alongside, O'Leary puffed up three flights, staggered along the marble-floored corridor, waited while the door was opened. Then he pushed through, made for the wide, canopied bed, with its yellow silk coverlet, eased his burden gently down. Behind him, the door clicked softly. He turned. He was alone in the room with Adoranne. Damn the nit-wits! Where were the smelling salts? Probably because he hadn't given his royal invitation, they were all hanging back. Well—

Adoranne's eyes fluttered. "Count Alain. . . ." She breathed. "Is he . . . all right. . . ?"

O'Leary sat on the edge of the bed. "Sure, he's OK. The Red Bull just cracked him over the head. Are you feeling OK now?"

"Of course, Lafayette. . . . But you—he threatened you with his sword—"

"The poor guy still doesn't know the score. That's all right. He was just trying to help you."

"You'll not hold a grudge?"

"Certainly not—"

Adoranne's shapely arms reached, went around Lafayette's neck, pulled his face down. Her lips were as soft as pink velvet. There were tiny diamond buttons up the front of her silvery dress. Lafayette's hand wandered to them....

"Your Majesty," Adoranne murmured.

"Do we have to wait until tomorrow?" O'Leary heard himself saying hoarsely.

"You are the king." Adoranne's hand went to the buttons. They parted easily: one, two. . . a curve of white throat. . . three, four, five. . . a bit of lace. . . six, and a tug at the ribbon, and—

There was a distinct thump! and the lights dimmed to a single bulb glaring fifty feet away over a dark door frame. O'Leary sat up, heard bed springs squeak under him. "Adoranne. . . ?" His hand groped, found only a coarse blanket stretched over a lumpy mattress.

"Hey, shaddup," a voice growled from six feet away. "Can't a guy get some sleep?"

"Where—where am I?" O'Leary choked out.

"Sleeping it off, hey? I didn't see youse when I come in. Y'er in the Railroad Men's Y, second floor, a buck for the bed, four bits extra for a shower. But what I says is, who needs it?"

O'Leary stumbled from the bed, picked his way between bunks to

the lighted door. He went down the stairs two at a time, pushed through the swinging door to the street, stared at dark shop windows, the blue gleam of mercury vapor lamps on tall steel poles. A few passers-by gave his clothes curious stares. He was back in Colby Corners.

An hour later. O'Leary stood on a corner, staring glumly at the gibbous moon hanging above Wienerburger's Groand Mkt. Just a little while ago he had seen that moon rise above a garden wall, gleaming through the poplars, reflecting in a fountain below the terrace where he and Nicodaeus stood waiting for Adoranne. He swallowed an egg a passing goose had laid in his throat. Adoranne...those buttons.

He straightened his back. One more try. He HAD to be able to get back. It wasn't fair to get stuck here, now, after all he'd gone through! He squeezed his eyes shut, again evoked the recollection of the garden, the French doors behind him, the music of the Blatz waltz. He sniffed, recalling the scent of jasmine, the fresh fragrance of the garden, hearing the murmur of wind through the trees. . . .

There was a clatter of metal, a groaning wow-wow-wow; an engine blattered into life. O'Leary stared dismally across at the jalopy parked across the way; it

dug off with a squeal of rubber, roared away down the street in a cloud of exhaust fumes. So much for night-blooming jasmine and the wind of the willows. Something was wrong. Always before, when he hadn't been distracted by something like a dinosaur snapping at his heels, he'd been able to make the shift, if he just tried hard enough. But now—a total blank. It was as though his abilities had suffered a paralytic stroke. He couldn't feel so much as a tentative stir even when he focussed every erg of Psychic Energy he possessed.

But there had to be *some* way. If he could only get word to Nicodaeus, tell him—

O'Leary stood stock-still, balancing a fragile idea. Nicodaeus. He had talked to him before—from the phone in the jail. And the number had ten digits, he remembered that. . . .

He screwed his eyes shut, tried for total recall. The reek of the cell, the chill of the morning air—Artesia was unaccountably cooler than Colby Corners—the white washed wall. The phone had been an old-fashioned one, with a brass mouthpiece. And the number—

It started with a six...six five three, that was it; then a four, and then a nine, two oh's, and ended with—was it two eleven? Or one one two...?

Lafayette looked along the street. There was a phone booth

there, half a block away. He tried his pocket; it yielded a dime. He set off at a run.

The phone booth was small, cramped, of an old-fashioned design, with a folding wooden door. Inside, an ancient instrument with a brass mouthpiece and a hand crank hung crookedly from a wall thick with carved initials and frank anatomical sketches accompanied by phone numbers. He held his breath, dropped the coin, twirled the crank. There was a long silence. Then a click. Then more silence. Then a sharp ping! and a hum.

"Central," a bright voice said tinnily in his ear. "Number, please."

"Uh—six, five, three, four, nine, oh, oh, two, one, one," Lafayette got off breathlessly.

"That number is no longer in service. Please consult your directory—"

"Wait!" O'Leary yelled. "I have to talk to you!"

"Yes, sir?"

"I have to get back—back to Artesia," O'Leary gulped, rallying his thoughts. "I was there, you see—I belong there—and everything was going swell; then, for no reason—here I was. And now—"

"I'm sorry, sir; where did you say you were calling from?"

"What? Why, from this phone booth—here in Colby Corners, on the corner next to Schrumph's

candy shop—what's that got—"

"An error has been made, sir; calls from that sector are not authorized—"

"Let me talk to the supervisor!" O'Leary demanded. "It's a matter of life or . . . or exile!"

"Well. . . one moment, please."

O'Leary waited, hearing his heart pound. Half a minute passed. Then a distinguished-sounding voice said, "Yes?"

"Hello! Look, I've been the victim of some sort of mistake; I was perfectly happy there in Artesia—"

"One moment, please," the voice interrupted. Then in an aside: "Operator, this seems to be some sort of eccentric; the call originates in one of the null sectors, I note. Probably an inebriated local, dialling in by mistake. Lucky to get a line, at that. With the circuits as busy as the are, a fifty-year wait isn't uncommon—"

"I'm not a drunk! I wish I were!" O'Leary yelled. "Somebody listen. I'm King Lafayette the First of Artesia! This is all some terrible mistake! I want to talk to Nicodaeus! He'll tell you! Come to think of it, it's probably all his fault; he went to make his report, and he probably mixed things up and forgot to tell you I belonged there, in spite of having arrived sort of informally—"

"Nicodaeus? Yes, I heard of his remarkable report, half an

hour ago. You say you were involved?"

"I was there! You can't send me back here! I don't belong here! My little bride is waiting for me, my people demand their king, Yockabump needs a job, and the thought of the foundry—"

"Oh, yes, you must be the fellow Fishnet or something of the sort; quite a merry chase you led our man. Do you know you've been creating a probability stress of .8 for weeks now? A remarkable technique you worked out, but I'm afraid we here at Central can't let it go on. You've caused a rather severe power drain on the Cosmic Energy Source. The dinosaur alone—"

"I didn't do that! He was already there!"

"One was, true—but you seem to have brought along another. At any rate, a Suppressor has now been focussed on you. It will hold you firmly in place in your present continuum. It will even eliminate all dreaming, so you can look forward to sleep uninterrupted by bothersome fantasies from now on—"

"I don't want to sleep uninterrupted by fantasies! I want to go home! Back to Artesia! I belong there, don't you understand?"

"No, my dear fellow; I can understand your desire to return—a rather pleasant, though backward, locus, or so our man states in his report—but we can't have

you grasshoppering about all over the continua, now can we? But thank you for you interest, and now goodbye—"

"Wait! Call Nicodaeus! He'll confirm what I said!"

"I'm a busy man, Mr. Fishnet; I have a back-log—"

"If you leave me here, there'll be a . . . a probability stress! And with the loused-up filing system you've got, it will be forty years before you remember what's causing it—and by then I'll be a retired draftsman, still subsisting on sardines—and no dreams."

"Hmmm. Well, I'll just make a check. Hold the line, please; if you ring off, you may never get through again. . . ."

O'Leary gripped the receiver, waiting. Through the glass in the door, he saw a fat woman approach along the street, digging in her purse for a coin. She seized the door handle, yanked, then caught sight of O'Leary, gave him an indignant look.

He covered the mouthpiece. "I'll be through in a minute," he muttered, mouthing the words through the glass. The woman snapped her jaw shut and glared at him.

Another minute ticked past. There was no sound on the line but a wavering hum. The fat woman rapped on the glass. O'Leary nodded, made motions indicating that he was waiting for a reply. The woman caught the

door handle, pulled it half open.

"See here, you, I'm in a hurry—" He jerked the door shut, braced a foot against it as the invading female shook it furiously.

"Come on," O'Leary muttered. "What's keeping you . . .?"

The fat woman stalked away. O'Leary relaxed. What was that fellow on the line doing? It had been a good five minutes now. What if he never came back? A fifty-year wait, he'd said. Lafayette pictured a pert face with jet black hair, an impish smile. Never to see her again....He blinked. Jet-black hair? But Adoranne was a blonde—

O'Leary turned at a sound. The fat lady was back, a large cop in tow.

"That's him!" He heard the shrill screech through the door. "Half an hour already he's been sitting there, just to spite me, not even talking, look at him!"

The cop stooped, peered, looked O'Leary up and down, taking in the green doublet, the long yellow hose, the ruff at the neck, the medals, ribbons, gold chain, the lime showing through the slashed puff sleeves.

"All right, you," the cop said. He hauled at the door. O'Leary braced himself, foot against the panel. The cop set himself, heaved—

The booth seemed to shimmer, faded to a smoky outline, and

was gone. O'Leary fell backward off a marble bench beside a gravelled walk under towering dark trees. He scrambled up, looked around at the palace gardens, the tall, lighted windows above the terrace, the colored lights strung around the dancing pavilion. He was back—back in Artesia!

He started across the grass at a run, emerged from a screen of shrubs, skidded to a halt. By a tinkling fountain just ahead Adoranne stood—kissing Count Alain.

O'Leary ducked back out of sight. "Alain—it's all so strange," the princess was saying. "I can't believe he's gone—just like that—without even saying goodbye."

"Now, Adoranne, don't fret. I guess he meant well—but after all, he *was* some kind of warlock—"

"He was fine, and noble, and brave, and I—I'll never forget him," Adoranne said.

"Certainly; I'm grateful to him for rescuing you—even if he did leave that infernal dragon eating rosebushes in the side garden. When the legend said he'd bring back the thing's hide, I never expected the dragon would still be in it."

"I'm so . . . so glad you're here, Alain." Adoranne looked up into the young count's handsome face. "You won't flit off and leave me all alone, will you?"

"Never, Your Highness. . . ."

The couple resumed their stroll, hand in hand. As soon as they had passed, O'Leary crept out, crossed to the terrace, went along it to a small door leading to the kitchens. Inside, a startled cook looked up.

"Shh!" O'Leary cautioned. "I'm travelling incognito." He wound his way past the hot ranges and the tables laden with food, went out by a rear door, took the service stair to the fourth floor. There was no one in sight, here in the servants's wing. He hurried along the corridor, rounded a corner—

A chambermaid in drab grey glanced up from her dusting; O'Leary looked into the tear-red-denied eyes of Daphne.

"Oh!" A breathtaking smile took the place of the girl's heart-broken expression of a moment before. "Your Majesty!" she breathed.

"Lafayette to you, girl," O'Leary said as he swept her into his arms.

"Princess Adoranne is an adorable cutie, and I had an obligation to do what I could for her—but when it got right down to it, it was your face that kept haunting me—"

"But—but you're a king, sire, and I'm just—"

"Let's leave the titles to Adoranne and Alain. We've got too many things to catch up on to

be bothered running the country."

EPILOGUE

Abstract from the log of Nico-
daeus, Inspector, Serial Num-
ber 786.

Ref: Locus Alpha Nine-three,
Plane V-87, Fox 22 lb. (Artesia)

Subj: Recruitment follow-up on
L. O'Leary.

"...since the double wedding
performed the following day, hav-
ing abdicated his claim to the
throne in favor of the Princess
Adoranne, subject appears might-

ily content, living with his bride,
the Lady Daphne, in a comfortable
apartment in the west palace
annex. Communication equip-
ment is still in place in a locked
cabinet in the former laboratory
of the present reporter. The line
will continue to be monitored
twenty-four hours daily. Quali-
fied volunteers are in scarce sup-
ply, and a number of interesting
assignments are waiting. On sev-
eral occasions, subject has lifted
the receiver and listened to the
dial tone, but to date, he has
not dialed. . . ."

END

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Sol Cohen
Publisher



KEEP OUT

BY FREDERIC BROWN

Master of the science-fiction vignette—with a whiplash in its tail—Fredric Brown (author of What Mad Universe and Martians, Go Home) shows that sometimes, as in "Keep Out," an experiment can succeed too well, as Earth finds out when it eagerly turns its children into "Martians" and is taught a lesson that all parents must learn sooner or later—this time on a Mars still deadly to them but home for their children.

DAPTINE is the secret of it. Adaptine, they called it first; then it got shortened to daptine. It let us adapt.

They explained it all to us when we were ten years old; I guess they thought we were too young to understand before then, although

we knew a lot of it already. They told us just after we landed on Mars.

"You're *home*, children," the Head Teacher told us after we had gone into the glassite dome they'd built for us there. And he told us there'd be a special lecture for us

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that evening, an important one that we must all attend.

And that evening he told us the whole story and the whys and wherefores. He stood up before us. He had to wear a heated space suit and helmet, of course, because the temperature in the dome was comfortable for us but already freezing cold for him and the air was already too thin for him to breathe. His voice came to us by radio from inside his helmet.

"Children," he said, "you are home. This is Mars, the planet on which you will spend the rest of your lives. You are Martians, the first Martians. You have lived five years on Earth and another five in space. Now you will spend ten years, until you are adults, in this dome, although toward the end of that time you will be allowed to spend increasingly long periods outdoors.

"Then you will go forth and make your own homes, live your own lives, as Martians. You will intermarry and your children will breed true. They too will be Martians.

"It is time you were told the history of this great experiment of which each of you is a part."

Then he told us.

Man, he said, had first reached Mars in 1985. It had been uninhabited by intelligent life (there is plenty of plant life and a few varieties of non-flying insects) and he had found it by terrestrial

standards uninhabitable. Man could survive on Mars only by living inside glassite domes and wearing space suits when he went outside of them. Except by day in the warmer seasons it was too cold for him. The air was too thin for him to breathe, and long exposure to sunlight — less filtered of rays harmful to him than on Earth because of the lesser atmosphere — could kill him. The plants were chemically alien to him and he could not eat them; he had to bring all his food from Earth or grow it in hydroponic tanks.

For fifty years he had tried to colonize Mars, and all his efforts had failed. Besides this dome which had been built for us there was only one other outpost, another glassite dome much smaller and less than a mile away.

It had looked as though mankind could never spread to the other planets of the solar system besides Earth for of all of them Mars was the least inhospitable; if he couldn't live here, there was no use even trying to colonize the others.

And then, in 2034, thirty years ago, a brilliant biochemist named Waymoth had discovered daptine. A miracle drug that worked not on the animal or person to whom it was given but on the progeny he conceived during a limited period of time after inoculation.

It gave his progeny almost limitless adaptability to changing conditions, provided the changes were made gradually.

Dr. Waymoth had inoculated and then mated a pair of guinea pigs; they had borne a litter of five and by placing each member of the litter under different and gradually changing conditions, he had obtained amazing results. When they attained maturity one of those guinea pigs was living comfortably at a temperature of forty below zero Fahrenheit, another was quite happy at a hundred and fifty above. A third was thriving on a diet that would have been deadly poison for an ordinary animal and a fourth was contented under a constant X-ray bombardment that would have killed one of its parents within minutes.

Subsequent experiments with many litters showed that animals who had been adapted to similar conditions bred true and their progeny was conditioned from birth to live under those conditions.

"Ten years later, ten years ago," the Head Teacher told us, "you children were born. Born of parents carefully selected from those who volunteered for the experiment. And from birth you have been brought up under carefully controlled and gradually changing conditions.

"From the time you were born the air you have breathed has

been very gradually thinned and its oxygen content reduced. Your lungs have compensated by becoming much greater in capacity, which is why your chests are so much larger than those of your teachers and attendants; when you are fully mature and are breathing air like that of Mars, the difference will be even greater.

"Your bodies are growing fur to enable you to stand the increasing cold. You are comfortable now under conditions which would kill ordinary people quickly. Since you were four years old your nurses and teachers have had to wear special protection to survive conditions that seem normal to you.

"In another ten years, at maturity, you will be completely acclimated to Mars. Its air will be your air; its food plants your food. Its extremes of temperature will be easy for you to endure and its median temperatures pleasant to you. Already, because of the five years we spent in space under gradually decreased gravitational pull, the gravity of Mars seems normal to you.

"It will be your planet, to live on and to populate. You are the children of Earth but you are the first Martians."

Of course we had known a lot of those things already.

The last year was the best. By then the air inside the dome — except for the pressurized parts

where our teachers and attendants live — was almost like that outside, and we were allowed out for increasingly long periods. It is good to be in the open.

The last few months they relaxed segregation of the sexes so we could begin choosing mates, although they told us there is to be no marriage until after the final day, after our full clearance. Choosing was not difficult in my case. I had made my choice long since and I'd felt sure that she felt the same way; I was right.

Tomorrow is the day of our freedom. Tomorrow we will be Martians, *the* Martians. Tomorrow we shall take over the planet.

Some among us are impatient, have been impatient for weeks now, but wiser counsel prevailed and we are waiting. We have waited twenty years and we can wait until the final day.

And tomorrow is the final day.

Tomorrow, at a signal, we will

kill the teachers and the other Earthmen among us before we go forth. They do not suspect, so it will be easy.

We have dissimilated for years now, and they do not know how we hate them. They do not know how disgusting and hideous we find them, with their ugly misshapen bodies, so narrow shouldered and tiny chested, their weak sibilant voices that need amplification to carry in our Martian air, and above all their white pasty hairless skins.

We shall kill them and then we shall go and smash the other dome so all the Earthmen there will die too.

If more Earthmen ever come to punish us, we can live and hide in the hills where they'll never find us. And if they try to build more domes here we'll smash them. We want no more to do with Earth.

This is our planet and we want no aliens. Keep off!

EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 4)

of your favorite magazine? Maybe they *did* convince you—for the time being—that, you know, this is just what it might be like in Year X or when we finally land on Mars or reach the nearest star. But if the lesson of the pulps—all past forty years of it—is a

valid indicator of how the *next* forty years of science fiction may seem (when reread by a 21st century generation of readers), then most of the science fiction that strikes you as plausible today may end up as the dated fantasies of tomorrow.

—JR



MARTIN

CAMBER

Incredible as it may seem, there must be a whole new generation of readers who haven't read much—or anything—by the late Abraham Merritt, whose mesmeric fantasies (who can forget The Moon Pool or The Face in the Abyss?) continue to survive the passing of the Pulps, as we knew them. If you're one of them, here's a sample of what you've been missing. If you're not, then we know that you'll still be glad to see "The People of the Pit" again, if only to get to that awesome moment when Stanton teeters on the edge of a chasm so wide that it's like three Grand Canyons—with the bottom dropped out!

THE PEOPLE OF THE PIT

By A. MERRITT

Illustrated by GAMBEE

NORTH of us a shaft of light shot half way to the zenith. It came from behind the ragged mountain toward which we had been pushing all day. The beam drove up through a column of blue haze whose edges were marked as sharply as the rain that streams from the edges of a thunder cloud. It was like the flash of a searchlight through an azure mist, and it cast no shadows.

As it struck upward, the five summits were outlined hard and black, and we saw that the whole

mountain was shaped like a hand. As the light silhouetted it, the gigantic fingers of the peaks seemed to stretch, the bulk that was the palm of the hand to push. It was exactly as though it moved to thrust something back. The shining beam held steady for a moment, then broke into myriads of tiny luminous globes that swung to and fro and dropped gently. They seemed to be searching.

The forest had become very still. Every wood noise held its

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breath. I felt the dogs pressing against my legs. They, too, were silent; but every muscle in their bodies trembled, their hair was stiff along their backs, and their eyes, fixed on the falling phosphorescent sparks, were filmed with the terror-glaze.

I looked at Starr Anderson. He was staring at the North where once more the beam had pulsed upward.

"The mountain shaped like a hand!" "I spoke without moving my lips. My mouth was as dry as though Lao T'zai had poured his fear-dust down my throat.

"It's the mountain we've been looking for," he answered in the same tone.

"But that light—what is it? Not the aurora surely," I said.

"Whoever heard of an aurora at this time of the year?"

He voiced the thought that was in my own mind.

"It makes me think something is being hunted up there," he said. "That the lights are seeking—an unholy sort of hunt—it's well for us to be out of range."

"The mountain seems to move each time the shaft shoots up," I said. "What's it keeping back, Starr? It makes me think of the frozen hand of cloud that Shan Nadour set before the Gate of Ghouls to keep them in the lairs that Eblis cut for them."

He raised a hand, listening.

From the north and high over-

head there came a whispering. It was not the rustling of the aurora, that rushing, crackling sound like ghosts of the winds that blew at Creation racing through the skeleton leaves of ancient trees that sheltered Lilith. This whispering held in it a demand. It was eager. It called us to come up where the beam was flashing. It—drew!

There was in it a note of inexorable insistence. It touched my heart with a thousand tiny fear-tipped fingers, and it filled me with a vast longing to race on and merge myself in the light. It must have been so that Ulysses felt when he strained at the mast and strove to obey the crystal sweet singing of the sirens.

The whispering grew louder.

"What the hell's the matter with those dogs?" cried Starr Anderson savagely. "Look at them!"

The Malemutes, whining, were racing away toward the light. We saw them disappear among the trees. There came back to us a mournful howling. Then that too died away and left nothing but the insistent murmuring overhead.

The glade we had camped in looked straight to the north. We had reached, I suppose, three hundred miles above the first great bend of the Kuskokwim toward the Yukon. Certainly we were in an untrodden part of the wilderness. We had pushed through from Dawson at the

breaking of the spring, on a fair lead to a lost mountain between the five peaks of which, so the Athabaskan medicine man had told us, the gold streams out like putty from a clenched fist.

Not an Indian were we able to get to go with us. The land of the Hand Mountain was accursed, they said.

We had sighted a mountain the night before, its ragged top faintly outlined against a pulsing glow. And now by the light that had led us, we saw that it was the very place we had sought.

Anderson stiffened. Through the whispering had broken a curious pad—pad and a rustling. It sounded as though a small bear were moving toward us.

I threw a pile of wood on the fire, and as it blazed up, saw something break through the bushes. It walked on all fours, but it did not walk like a bear. All at once it flashed upon me—it was like a baby crawling upstairs. The forepaws lifted themselves in grotesquely infantile fashion. It was grotesque but it was—terrible. It drew closer. We reached for our guns—and dropped them. Suddenly we knew that this crawling thing was a man!

It was a man. Still with that high climbing pad—pad he swayed to the fire. He stopped.

"Safe," whispered the crawling man in a voice that was an echo of the whispering over-

head. "Quite safe here. They can't get out of the blue, you know. They can't get you—unless you answer them—"

"He's mad," said Anderson, and then gently to this broken thing that had been a man: "You're all right—there's nothing after you."

"Don't answer them," repeated the crawling man, "the lights, I mean."

"The lights," I cried, startled even out of pity. "What are they?"

"The people of the pit!" he murmured. He fell upon his side.

We ran to him. Anderson knelt. "God's love!" he cried. "Frank, look at this!"

He pointed to the hands. The wrists were covered with torn rags of a heavy shirt. The hands themselves were—stumps! The fingers had been bent into the palms, and the flesh had been worn to the bone. They looked like the feet of a little black elephant! My eyes traveled down the body. Around the waist was a heavy band of yellow metal. From it fell a ring and a dozen links of shining white chain!

"What is he? Where did he come from?" said Anderson. "Look, he's fast asleep—yet even in his sleep his arms try to climb, and his feet draw themselves up one after the other! And his knees—how in God's name was he ever able to move on them?"

It was even as he said. In the deep sleep that had come upon the crawler, arms and legs kept rising in a deliberate, dreadful climbing motion. It was as though they had a life of their own—they kept their movement independently of the motionless body. They were semaphoric motions. If you have ever stood at the back of a train and watched the semaphores rise and fall you will know exactly what I mean.

Abruptly the overhead whispering ceased. The shaft of light dropped and did not rise again. The crawling man became still. A gentle glow began to grow around us. The short Alaskan summer night was over. Anderson rubbed his eyes and turned me a haggard face.

"Man!" he exclaimed. "You look as though you have been sick!"

"No more than you, Starr!" I said. "That was sheer, stark horror! What do you make of it all?"

"I'm thinking our only answer lies there," he answered, pointing to the figure that lay so motionless under the blankets we had thrown over him. "Whatever they were—that's what they were after. There was no aurora about those lights, Frank. It was like the flaring up of some queer hell the preacher folk never frightened us with."

"We'll go no further to-day," I said. "I wouldn't wake him up for

all the gold that runs between the fingers of the five peaks—nor for all the devils that may be behind them."

The crawling man lay in a sleep as deep as the Styx. We bathed and bandaged the pads that had been his hands. Arms and legs were as rigid as though they were crutches. He did not move while we worked over him. He lay as he had fallen, the arms a trifle raised, the knees bent.

I began filing the band that ringed the sleeper's waist. It was gold, but it was like no gold I had ever handled. Pure gold is soft. This was soft too—but it had an unclean, viscid life of its own.

It clung to the file and I could have sworn that it writhed like a live thing when I cut into it. I gashed through it, bent it away from the body and hurled it away. It was—loathsome!

All that day the crawler slept. Darkness came and still he slept. But that night there was no shaft of blue haze from behind the peaks, no questioning globes of light, no whispering. Some spell of horror seemed withdrawn—but not far. Both Anderson and I felt that the menace was there, withdrawn perhaps, but waiting.

It was noon next day when the crawling man awoke. I jumped as the pleasant, drawling voice sounded.

"How long have I slept?" he

said. His pale blue eyes grew quizzical as I stared at him.

"A night—and almost two days," I said.

"Were there any lights up there last night?" He nodded to the north eagerly. "Any whispering?"

"Neither," I answered. His head fell back and he stared up at the sky.

"They've given it up, then?" he said at last.

"Who have given it up?" asked Anderson.

And once more—"The people of the pit!" the crawling man answered.

We stared at him, and again faintly I, for one, felt that queer, maddening desire that the lights had brought with them.

"The people of the pit," he repeated. "Things some god of evil made before the Flood and that somehow have escaped the good God's vengeance. They were calling me!" he added simply.

Anderson and I looked at each other, the same thought in both our minds.

"No," said the crawling man, reading what it was, "I'm not insane. Give me a very little to drink. I'm going to die soon. Will you take me as far south as you can before I die? And afterwards will you build a fire and burn me? I want to be in such shape that no hellish wile of theirs can drag my body back to them. You'll do

it when I've told you about them," he said as we hesitated.

He drank the brandy and water we lifted to his lips.

"Arms and legs quite dead," he said. "Dead as I'll be soon. Well, they did well for me. Now I'll tell you what's up there behind that hand. Hell!"

"Listen. My name is Stanton—Sinclair Stanton. Class 1900, Yale. Explorer. I started away from Dawson last year to hunt for five peaks that rose like a hand in a haunted country and ran pure gold between them. Same thing you were after? I thought so. Late last fall my comrade sickened. I sent him back with some Indians. A little later my Indians found out what I was after. They ran away from me. I decided I'd stick, built a cabin, stocked myself with food and lay down to winter it. Did it not badly—it was a pretty mild winter you'll remember. In the spring I started off again. A little less than two weeks ago I sighted the five peaks. Not from this side though—the other. Give me some more brandy."

"I'd made too wide a detour," he went on. "I'd gotten too far north; I beat back. From this side you see nothing but forest straight up to the base of the hand. Over on the other side—"

He was silent for a moment.

"Over there is forest too. But it doesn't reach so far. No! I came out of it. Stretching for miles

in front of me was a level plain. It was as worn and ancient looking as the desert around the broken shell of Babylon. At its end rose the peaks. Between me and them—far off—was what looked like a low dike or rocks. Then—I ran across the road!”

“The road!” cried Anderson incredulously.

“The road,” said the crawling man. “A fine, smooth, stone road. It ran straight on to the mountain. Oh, it was a road all right—and worn as though millions and millions of feet had passed over it for thousands of years. On each side of it were sand and heaps of stone. After a while I began to notice these stones. They were cut, and the shape of the heaps somehow gave me the idea that a hundred thousand years ago they might have been the ruins of houses. They were as old looking as that. I sensed man about them, and at the same time they smelled of immemorial antiquity.

“The peaks grew closer. The heaps of ruins thicker. Something inexpressibly desolate hovered over them, something sinister, something reached from them that struck my heart like the touch of ghosts so old that they could be only the ghosts of ghosts. I went on.

“Now I saw that what I had thought to be a low range at the base of the peaks was a thicker litter of ruins. The Hand

Mountain was really much farther off. The road itself passed through these ruins and between two high rocks that raised themselves like a gateway.” The crawling man paused. His hands began that sickening pad—pad again. Little drops of bloody sweat showed on his forehead. After a moment he grew quiet. He smiled.

“They were a gateway,” he said. “I reached them. I went between them. I sprawled flat, clutching the earth in awe and terror. For I was on a broad stone platform. Before me was—sheer space! Imagine the Grand Canyon three times as wide, roughly circular and with the bottom dropped out. That would be something like what I was looking into.

“It was like peeping over the edge of a cleft world down into the infinity where the planets roll! On the far side stood the five peaks. They looked like a gigantic warning hand stretched up to the sky. The lips of the abyss curved away on each side of me.

“I could see down perhaps a thousand feet. Then a thick blue haze shut out the eye. It was like the blue you see gather on the high hills at dusk. But the pit—it was awesome! Awesome as the Maori’s Gulf of Ranelak, that sinks between the living and the dead and that only the freshly released soul has strength to leap across—but never strength to leap back again.

"I crept back from the verge and stood up, weak, shaking. My hand rested against one of the rocks of the gateway. There was carving upon it. There in sharp outlines was the heroic figure of a man. His back was turned. His arms were stretched above his head, and between them he carried something that looked like a sun disk with radiating lines of light. There were symbols on the disk that reminded me of Chinese. But they were not Chinese. No! They had been made by hands, dust ages before the Chinese stirred in the womb of time.

"I looked at the opposite rock. It bore an exactly similar figure. There was an odd peaked head-dress on both. The rocks themselves were triangular, and the carvings were on the side closest the pit. The gesture of the men seemed to be that of holding back—of barring. I looked closer. Behind the outstretched hands and the disks I seemed to see a host of vague shapes and, plainly a multitude of globes.

"I traced them out vaguely. Suddenly I felt unaccountably sick. There had come to me an impression—I can't call it sight—an impression of enormous upright slugs. Their swollen bodies seemed to dissolve, then swim into sight, then dissolve again—all except the globes which were their heads and that remained clear. They were—unutterably

loathsome. Overcome by an inexplicable and overpowering nausea I stretched myself upon the slab. And then—I saw the stairway that led down into the pit!"

"A stairway!" we cried.

"A stairway," repeated the crawling man as patiently as before. "It seemed not so much carved out of the rock as built into it. Each slab was perhaps twenty feet long and five feet wide. They ran down from the platform and vanished into the blue haze."

"A stairway," said Anderson incredulously, "built into the wall of a precipice and leading down into a bottomless pit—"

"Not bottomless," interrupted the crawling man. "There was a bottom. Yes. I reached it," he went on dully. "Down the stairway—down the stairway."

He seemed to grip his mind.

"Yes," he went on firmly. "I went down the stairway. But not that day. I made my camp back of the gates. At dawn I filled my knapsack with food, my two canteens with water from a spring that wells up there by the gateway, walked between the carved monoliths and stepped over the edge of the pit.

"The steps run along the side of the pit at a forty degree pitch. As I went down and down I studied them. They were of a greenish rock quite different from the granitic porphyry that formed the

wall of the pit. At first I thought that the builders had taken advantage of an outcropping stratum, and had carved the gigantic flight from it. But the regularity of the angle at which it fell made me doubtful of this theory.

"After I had gone down perhaps half a mile I stepped out upon a landing. From this landing the stairs made a V-shaped turn and again ran on downward, clinging to the cliff at the same angle as the first flight. After I had made three of these turns, I knew that the steps dropped straight down to wherever they went in a succession of angles. No strata could be so regular as that. No, the stairway was built by hands! But whose? And why? The answer is in those ruins around the edge of the pit—never I think to be read.

"By noon I had lost sight of the lip of the abyss. Above me, below me, was nothing but the blue haze. Beside me, too, was nothingness, for the further breast of rock had long since vanished in the same haze. I felt no dizziness, and no fear, only a vast curiosity. What was I to discover? Some ancient and wonderful civilization that had ruled when the poles were tropical gardens? A new world? The key to the mystery of man himself? Nothing living, I felt sure—all was too old for life. Still, a work so wonderful must lead to something quite

as wonderful I knew. What was it? I went on.

"At regular intervals I had passed the mouths of small caves. There would be three thousand steps and then an opening, three thousand steps more and an opening—and so on and on. Late that afternoon I stopped before one of these clefts. I suppose I had gone then three miles down the pit, although the angles were such that I had walked in all fully ten miles. I examined the entrance. On each side were carved the same figures as on the great portals at the lip of the pit. But now they were standing face forward, the arms outstretched with their disks, as though holding something back from the shaft itself. Now, too, their faces were covered with veils and there were no hideous shapes behind them.

"I went inside the cave. It ran back for twenty yards like a burrow. It was dry and perfectly light. I could see, outside, the blue haze rising upward like a column. I felt an extraordinary sense of security, although I had not been conscious of any fear. I felt that the figures at the entrance were guardians—but against what? I felt so secure that even curiosity on this point was dulled.

"The blue haze thickened and grew faintly luminescent. I fancied that it was dusk above. I ate and drank a little and slept. When I awoke the blue had light-

ened again, and I fancied it was dawn above. I went on. I forgot the gulf yawning at my side. I felt no fatigue and little hunger or thirst, although I had drunk and eaten sparingly. That night I spent within another of the caves. And at dawn I descended again.

"It was late that day when I first saw the city—"

He was silent for a time.

"The city," he said at last, "the city of the pit! But not such a city as you have ever seen—nor any other man who has lived to tell of it. The pit, I think, must be shaped like a bottle; the opening before the five peaks is the neck. But how wide the bottom is I do not know—thousands of miles, maybe. And what may lie behind the city—I do not know.

"I had begun to catch little glints of light far down in the blue. Then I saw the tops of—trees, I suppose they are. But not our kind of trees—unpleasant, reptilian trees. They reared themselves on high, thin trunks and their tops were nests of thick tendrils with ugly little leaves like narrow heads—or snake heads.

"The trees were red, a vivid, angry red. Here and there I began to glimpse spots of shining yellow. I knew these were water because I could see things breaking through their surface—or at least I could see the splash and ripple, but what it was that disturbed them I never saw.

"Straight beneath me was the city. Mile after mile of closely packed cylinders that lay upon their sides in pyramids of three, of five—of dozens—piled upon each other. It is so hard to make you see what that city is like—look, suppose you have water pipes of a certain length, and first you lay three of them side by side, and on top of them you place two and on these two one; or suppose you take five for a foundation and place on these four and then three, then two and then one. Do you see? That was the way they looked.

"And they were topped by towers, by minarets, by flares, by fans and twisted monstrosities. They gleamed as though coated with pale rose flame. Beside them the venomous red trees raised themselves like the heads of hydras guarding nests of gigantic jeweled and sleeping worms!

"A few feet beneath me the stairway jutted out into a titanic arch, unearthly as the span that bridges Hell and leads to Asgard. It curved out and down straight through the top of the highest pile of carven cylinders and then—it vanished through it. It was appalling—it was demoniac—"

The crawling man stopped. His eyes rolled up into his head. He trembled, and again his arms and legs began their horrible crawling movement. From his lips came a whispering. It was an echo of the

high murmuring we had heard the night he came to us. I put my hands over his eyes. He quieted.

"The things accursed!" he said. "The People of the Pit! Did I whisper? Yes—but they can't get me now—they can't!"

After a time he began as quietly as before.

"I crossed that span. I went down through the top of that—building. Blue darkness shrouded me for a moment, and I felt the steps twist into a spiral. I wound down and then I was standing high up in—I can't tell you what. I'll have to call it a room. We have no images for what is in the pit. A hundred feet below me was the floor. The walls sloped down and out from where I stood in a series of widening crescents. The place was colossal—and it was filled with a curious, mottled red light. It was like the light inside a green and gold-flecked fire opal.

"The spiral stairs wound below me. I went down to the last step. Far in front of me rose a high columned altar. Its pillars were carved in monstrous scrolls—like mad octopuses with a thousand drunken tentacles; they rested on the backs of shapeless monstrosities carved in crimson stone. The altar front was a gigantic slab of purple covered with carvings.

"I can't describe these carvings! No human being could—the hu-

man eye cannot grasp them any more than it can grasp shapes that haunt the fourth dimension. Only a subtle sense in the back of the brain grasped them vaguely. They were formless things that gave no conscious image, yet pressed into the mind like small hot seals—ideas of hate—of combat between unthinkable monstrous things—victories in a nebulous hell of steaming obscene jungles—aspirations and ideals immeasurably loathsome—

"And as I stood I grew aware of something that lay behind the lip of the altar fifty feet above me. I *knew* it was there—I felt it with every hair and every tiny bit of my skin. Something infinitely malignant, infinitely horrible, infinitely ancient. It lurked, it brooded, it saw me, it threatened and it—was invisible!

"Behind me was a circle of blue light. Something urged me to turn back, to climb the stairs and make away. It was impossible. Terror of that unseen watching thing behind the altar raced me onward like a whirlwind. I passed through the circle. I was in a way that stretched on into dim distance between the rows of carven cylinders.

"Here and there the red trees arose. Between them rolled the stone burrows. And now I could take in the amazing ornamentation that clothed them. They were like the trunks of smooth-

skinned trees that had fallen and had been clothed with high-reaching, fantastic orchids. Yes—those cylinders were like that—and more. They should have gone out with dinosaurs. They were—monstrous! They struck the eye like a blow, and they passed across the nerves like a rasp. And nowhere was there sight or sound of a living thing.

"There were circular openings in the cylinders like the opening in the temple of the stairway through which I had run. I passed through one of them. I was in a long bare vaulted room whose curving sides half closed twenty feet over my head, leaving a wide slit that opened into another vaulted chamber above. I saw nothing in the room save the same mottled reddish light of the temple.

"I stumbled. Still I could see nothing, but—my skin prickled and my heart stopped! There *was* something on the floor over which I had tripped!

"I reached down—and my hand touched a—thing—cold and smooth—that moved under it—I turned and ran out of that place. I was filled with a sick loathing that had in it something of madness—I ran on and on—blindly—wringing my hands—weeping with horror—

"When I came to myself, I was still among the stone cylinders and red trees. I tried to retrace my

steps, to find the temple; for now I was more than afraid. I was like a new soul panic-stricken with the first terrors of hell. But I could not find the temple! And the haze began to thicken and glow, the cylinders to shine more brightly.

"Suddenly I knew that it was dusk in my own world above and that the thickening of the haze was the signal for the awakening of whatever things lived in the pit.

"I scrambled up the sides of one of the burrows. I hid behind a twisted nightmare of stone. Perhaps, I thought, there was a chance of remaining hidden until the blue lightened, the peril passed, and I could escape. There began to grow around me a murmur. It was everywhere—and it grew and grew into a great whispering. I peeped from the side of the stone down into the street.

"I saw lights passing and repassing. More and more lights—they swam out of the circular doorways, and they thronged the street. The highest were eight feet above the pave; the lowest perhaps two. They hurried, they sauntered, they bowed, they stopped and whispered—and there was *nothing* under them!"

"Nothing under them!" breathed Anderson.

"No," he went on, "that was the terrible part of it—there was nothing under them. Yet certainly the lights were living things.

They had consciousness, volition—what else I did not know. They were nearly two feet across, the largest. Their center was a bright nucleus—red, blue, green. This nucleus faded off gradually into a misty glow that did not end abruptly. It, too, seemed to fade off into nothingness—but a nothingness that had under it a—somethingness.

"I strained my eyes trying to grasp this body into which the lights merged and which one could only *feel* was there, but could not *see*.

"And all at once I grew rigid. Something cold, and thin like a whip, had touched my face. I turned my head. Close behind were three of the lights. They were a pale blue. They looked at me—if you can imagine lights that are eyes.

"Another whiplash gripped my shoulder. Under the closest light came a shrill whispering. I shrieked. Abruptly the murmuring in the street ceased.

"I dragged my eyes from the pale-blue globe that held them and looked out; the lights in the streets were rising by myriads to the level of where I stood! There they stopped and peered at me. They crowded and jostled as though they were a crowd of curious people on Broadway.

"That was the horrible part of it. I felt a score of the lashes touch me—I shrieked again. Then

—darkness and a sensation of falling through vast depths.

"When I awoke to consciousness I was again in the great place of the stairway, lying at the foot of the altar. All was silent. There were no lights—only the mottled red glow.

"I jumped to my feet and ran toward the steps. Something jerked me back to my knees. And then I saw that around my waist had been fastened a yellow ring of metal. From it hung a chain, and this chain passed up over the lip of the high ledge.

"I reached into my pockets for my knife to cut through the ring. It was not there! I had been stripped of everything except one of the canteens that I had hung around my neck, and which I suppose they had thought was part of me.

"I tried to break the ring. It seemed alive. It writhed in my hands and drew itself closer around me!

"I pulled at the chain. It was immovable. There came to me the consciousness of the unseen thing above the altar, and I groveled at the foot of the slab. Think—alone in that place of strange light with the brooding ancient horror above me—a monstrous Thing, a Thing unthinkable—an unseen thing that poured forth horror—

"After a while I gripped myself. Then I saw beside one of the pillars a yellow bowl filled

with a thick, white liquid. I drank it. If it killed, I did not care. But its taste was pleasant and as I drank, strength came back to me with a rush. Clearly I was not to be starved. The people of the pit, whatever they were, had a conception of human needs.

"And now once more the reddish, mottled gleam began to deepen. Again outside arose the humming, and through the circle that was the entrance to the temple came streaming the globes. They ranged themselves in ranks until they filled the temple. Their whispering grew into a chant, a cadenced whispering chant that rose and fell, rose and fell while to its rhythm the globes lifted and sank, lifted and sank.

"All the night the lights came and went; and all that night the chant sounded as they rose and fell. At the last I felt myself only an atom of consciousness in the sea of that whispering, an atom that rose and fell with the bowing globes.

"I tell you that even my heart pulsed in unison with them! And the red glow faded, the lights streamed out; the whispering died. I was again alone, and I knew that again day had begun in my own world.

"I slept. When I awoke, I found beside the pillar another bowl of the white liquid. I scrutinized the chain that held me to the altar.

I began to rub two of the links together. I did this for hours. When the red began to thicken, there was a ridge worn in the links. Hope rushed up within me. There was, then, a chance to escape.

"With the thickening the lights came again. All through that night the whispering chant sounded, and the globes rose and fell. The chant seized me. It pulsed through me until every nerve and muscle quivered to it. My lips began to quiver. They strove like a man trying to cry out in a nightmare. And at last they, too, were whispering—whispering the evil chant of the people of the pit. My body bowed in unison with the lights.

"I was—God forgive me!—in movement and sound, one with these nameless things, while my soul sank back sick with horror, but powerless. And as I whispered I—saw *them*!

"Saw the things under the lights. Great transparent snail-like bodies—dozens of waving tentacles stretching from them; little round gaping mouths under the luminous, seeing globes. They were like specters of inconceivably monstrous slugs! And as I stared, still bowing and whispering, the dawn came, and they streamed to and through the entrance. They did not crawl or walk—they floated! They floated and were—gone!

"I did not sleep, I worked all that day at my chain. By the thickening of the red I had worn it a sixth through. And all that night, under their spell, I whispered and bowed with the pit people, joining in their chant to the thing that brooded above me!

"Twice again the red thickened and lessened and the chant held me. And then, on the morning of the fifth day, I broke the worn links. I was free! I ran to the stairway. With eyes closed I rushed up and past the unseen horror behind the altar-ledge and was out upon the bridge. I crossed the span and began the ascent of the stairway.

"Can you think what it is to climb straight up the verge of a cleft-world—with hell behind you? Well—worse than hell was behind me, and terror rode me.

"The city of the pit had long been lost in the blue haze before I knew that I could climb no more. My heart beat upon my ears like a sledge. I fell before one of the little caves, feeling that here at last was sanctuary. I crept far back within it and waited for the haze to thicken. Almost at once it did so, and from far below me came a vast and angry murmur. Crouching at the back of the cave, I saw a swift light go shooting up through the blue haze, then die down and break, and as it dimmed and broke, I saw myriads of the globes that are the eyes of the

pit people swing downward into the abyss. Again and again the light pulsed, and the globes rose with it and fell.

"They were hunting me! They knew I must be somewhere still on the stairway, or, if hiding below, I must some time take to the stairway to escape. The whispering grew louder, more insistent.

"There began to pulse through me a dreadful desire to join in the whispering as I had done in the temple. Something told me that if I did, the sculptured figures could no longer save me; that I would go out and down again into the temple forever! I bit my lips through and through to still them, and all that night the beam shot up through the abyss, the globes swung, and the whispering sounded—and I prayed to the power of the caves and the sculptured figures that still had power to guard them."

He paused—his strength was going.

Then almost in a whisper: "I thought, what were the people who had carved them? Why had they built their city around the verge, and why had they set that stairway in the pit? What had they been to the things that dwelt at the bottom, and what use had the things been to them that they should live beside their dwelling-place? That there had been some purpose was certain. No work so

prodigious as the stairway would have been undertaken otherwise. But what was the purpose? And why was it that those who had dwelt about the abyss had passed away ages gone and the dwellers in the abyss still lived?"

He looked at us: "I could find no answer. I wonder if even when I am dead I shall know. I doubt it.

"Dawn came as I wondered, and with it—silence. I drank what was left of the liquid in my canteen, crept from the cave, and began to climb again. That afternoon my legs gave out. I tore off my shirt and made from it pads for my knees and coverings for my hands. I crawled upward. I crawled up and up. And again I crept into one of the caves and waited until again the blue thickened, the shaft of light shot through it, and the whispering came.

"But now there was a new note in the whispering. It was no longer threatening. It called and coaxed. It—drew.

"A terror gripped me. There had come upon me a mighty desire to leave the cave and go out where the lights swung; to let them do with me what they pleased, carry me where they wished. The desire grew. It gained fresh impulse with every rise of the beam, until at last I vibrated with the desire as I had vibrated to the chant in the Temple.

"My body was a pendulum. Up would go the beam, and I would swing toward it! Only my soul kept steady. It held me fast to the floor of the cave, and it placed a hand over my lips to still them. And all that night I fought with my body and lips against the spell of the pit people.

"Dawn came. Again I crept from the cave and faced the stairway. I could not rise. My hands were torn and bleeding, my knees an agony. I forced myself upward step by step.

"After a while my hands became numb, the pain left my knees. They deadened. Step by step my will drove my body upward upon them. And time after time I would sink back within myself to oblivion—only to wake again and find that all the time I had been steadily climbing upward.

"And then—only a dream of crawling up infinite stretches of steps—memories of dull horror while hidden within caves, with thousands of lights pulsing with-out, and whisperings that called and called me—memory of a time when I awoke to find that my body was obeying the call and had carried me half-way out between the guardians of the portals, while thousands of gleaming globes rested in the blue haze and watched me. Glimpses of bitter fights against sleep, and always—a climb up and up along infinite

distances of steps that led from a lost Abaddon to a paradise of the blue sky and open world!

"At last a consciousness of clear sky close above me, the lip of the pit before me. Memory of passing between the great portals of the pit and of steady withdrawal from it. Dreams of giant men with strange, peaked crowns and veiled faces who pushed me onward and onward and onward, and held back pulsing globules of light that sought to draw me back to a gulf wherein planets swam between the branches of red trees that had snakes for crowns.

"And then a long, long sleep—how long God alone knows—in a cleft of rocks; an awakening to see far in the north the beam still rising and falling, the lights still hunting, the whispering high above me calling—and knowledge that no longer had they power to draw me.

"Again crawling on dead arms and legs that moved—that moved—like the Ancient Mariner's ship—without volition of mine. And

then—your fire—and this—safety."

The crawling man smiled at us for a moment, then quickly fell asleep.

That afternoon we struck camp, and, carrying the crawling man, started back south. For three days we carried him, and still he slept. And on the third day, still sleeping, he died. We built a great pile of wood and we burned his body, as he had asked. We scattered his ashes about the forest with the ashes of the trees that had consumed him.

It must be a great magic, indeed, that can disentangle those ashes and draw them back in a rushing cloud to the pit he called accursed. I do not think that even the people of the pit have such a spell. No.

But Anderson and I did not return to the five peaks to see. And if the gold does stream out between the five peaks of the Hand Mountain, like putty from a clenched fist—there it may remain for all of us.

THE END

WATCH FOR THE BIG

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OF AMAZING STORIES

ON SALE

FEB. 24th

Your Soul Comes C.O.D.

By MACK REYNOLDS

Illustrated by SUMMERS

Ever feel so fed up sometimes that you almost wished there really was something to this Deal with the Devil business? Thought so. But if you've been too skeptical to do anything about it, then take a tip from what happened to Norman Wallace. A little more desperate than most, he gave it a try. Got together the charms, the potions, the fragment of unicorn horn—the whole bit—and found that it really worked, so well in fact that the Spirit came even before he was summoned!



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In view of the trouble to which he had gone in order to acquire such out of the way items as a piece of unicorn horn and three drops of blood from a virgin, it was rather disconcerting to have the spirit appear even before the prescribed routine. In fact, he hadn't even got his protective pentacle drawn when he looked up to find the entity materialized in his rickety easy chair.

The spirit said, "You don't really need that, you know."

Norman Wallace stared at his visitor, even after all these months of research, unbelievably. The other was far from what the young man expected. Somehow, he was reminded of Lincoln, his face almost beautiful in its infinite sadness.

The spirit nodded at the pentacle. "Mere superstition. It couldn't protect you if my purpose was to do you harm. But, more important still, I am quite incapable of such aggression. Man has freedom of choice, free will; we of the other worlds can only help him destroy—or elevate—himself; we cannot initiate."

Norman was shaken, but not quite to the point of speechlessness. He pointed to his assembled drugs, charms, potions and incenses and said, almost indignantly, "But I haven't performed the rite, as yet."

The other nodded and shrugged. "What's the difference? You wished to summon a spirit. Very well, here I am. The desire is of more importance than the act of combining those rather silly items. But, to get to the point, just what is it you desire?"

Norman Wallace took a deep breath and got down to business. He indicated his shabby quarters. "I can bear this no longer," he said. "I want a few years of decency in living, a few years of the good things of life that others enjoy. So—"

"So in your desperation you wish to sell your soul in return for help."

"That's right."

The spirit considered momentarily. "Suppose I give you my support for forty years? Suppose I guarantee you love, wealth, power, to the degree you desire them? At the end of that time your soul is mine?"

Norman Wallace's mouth tightened, but he said, "That's agreeable."

The spirit came to its feet. "Very well, the pact is made."

The other frowned. "Don't we make out a contract or something? Don't I have to sign in blood?"

The faintest of smiles came to the melancholy face of the spirit. "That won't be necessary. The pact has been made; neither of us will nor can break it."

Suddenly he had disappeared. And almost simultaneously came a knock at the door. Dazed, Norman came to his feet and opened it.

Harriet was there and immediately in his arms. "Oh, darling, darling, I was so wrong."

He held her back, at arm's length, in amazement. "You mean that you've changed your mind, you'll marry me?"

"Oh, darling, yes. I thought going away from you, spending a few months in Florida, would let me forget. I was so wrong."

Frowning worriedly, he indicated the poverty of his room. "But Harriet, we'd still—"

She smiled now, and laughed up at him. "Remember that little farm I told you my aunt left me? The one in Louisiana?"

He nodded, uncomprehending.

"Oil, darling," she bubbled over. "Enough to give you the start you need."

And so it went for forty years. Wealth to the modest extent he desired it; prestige to the small degree his ambition demanded; but, most important of all, love that ripened and ever grew as the years went by. And a home rich with children, and the respect and affection of his neighbors and his associates.

Not that he had ever seen the spirit again, not in all those years. Almost, it was possible for him to look back at his life

and think it was all of his own doing. Each success had seemingly been not inordinary good luck, or a result of his own efforts. Sometimes he had even tried to convince himself that the pact he'd made was a figment of his imagination, that the demon he had thought he had summoned was a result of too much worry, too much work, too little food and recreation back in those days of his poverty-stricken youth.

But subconsciously he knew. *He knew!*

And so it was that after his forty years he sat alone in his study and waited. Harriet had gone on to bed; the children, of course, had long since been married themselves and were living their own peaceful, happy lives.

He wondered now, as he looked back over the years, at the use to which he had put the demon's assistance. He had been promised love, wealth, and power to the extent he desired them. But, somehow, he had wanted no more than sufficient for himself and his family. He had made no attempt to accumulate the fortune of a Midas; nor, for that matter, had he attained his possessions by recourse to the racetrack or stock market. He had worked hard during those forty years.

He had been promised power,

too. Why had he taken so little? He had been content to assume a position in society that coincided with his natural abilities. He could have been president or, for that matter, dictator of the world. Why hadn't he?

Ah, but he had taken his full measure of the other. His cup had overflowed with love. In all the years, the romance between Harriet and him had never waned. And the children? Well, for instance, the way they had returned to the old home from all over the nation this last Christmas had proven their affection.

And now suddenly he thought he knew his motivation. Somewhere, beneath it all, he had been attempting to forestall the fate awaiting him. Subconsciously he had told himself that if he were moderate, if he led the good life, he abstained from demanding the ultimate, his reckoning with the demon would be the easier.

He laugh abruptly, bitterly.

And suddenly fear washed over him. The reckoning was now.

No matter what he had done with the demonic powers awarded him. No matter how he had loved and been loved. No matter how much he repented now.

His soul was the spirit's.

He clasped his hands tightly to the arms of his chair.

Run! Hide! ESCAPE!

But he sank back again. There was no place to run. No place to hide. No way of escape.

The spirit materialized on the couch across from him.

Norman Wallace nodded his gray head in submission. "I was expecting you."

"Your forty years are up," the spirit told him.

"Yes, I know." Hopelessness had replaced fear now.

"Is there any reason why our pact should not be fulfilled? You are satisfied that I have suitably kept my part of the bargain?"

The old man hesitated, then nodded again. "I am satisfied."

"Then you are ready to go? You have taken farewell of those you love, made what arrangements you thought necessary?"

"Yes. Yes, I am ready." His voice was firm now. "I suppose it will be hard on Harriet for a time, but then, we must all face the end sooner or later, and only recently my doctor warned me of my heart. Harriet always said she wanted me to go first, that she would hate to think of me alone in life after we have been so close."

The spirit came to its feet. "Very well, let us be on our way."

Norman Wallace arose too and the shock was not so great as he might have expected when he was able to look back and

see himself sitting there in the easy chair, his face pale and his eyes staring unseeing.

"Then I am dead already?"

"Yes," the spirit told him, "Your doctor's diagnosis was quite accurate. Come."

And suddenly they were in another place and Norman Wallace stared about uncomprehendingly.

He said, "It seems that in all my relations with you I have been continually surprised at the inaccuracy of the legends and myths."

"Oh?" the spirit said.

"Yes. When you first appeared, you didn't look like my life-long conception of a demon. Nor in my dealings with you have you acted the way I supposed you would. Now, this place has none of the attributes I had expected of hell."

The spirit smiled. "My dear Norman, why is it that so many suppose that souls are of less interest to us than to our adversaries? Why should not one side strive for a worthy one as well as the other? I am not a demon, nor is this hell."

THE END

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had so characterized the later development of the Average men exhibited itself to the Advanced group — five hundred thousand years earlier. They built a flourishing civilization, and they were not fools by any means. They looked out at their sub-human brothers smashing each other's heads with stone axes and they saw a golden opportunity — an opportunity to shape their own destiny through that of the animals in the caves.

And so, quite without their knowledge, they *domesticated* the other men.

Do the sheep in the field understand the social system which put them there? Does the ape born and reared in a zoo understand that he is not a free agent? How is he to judge, never having known anything else?

The other men, obviously, were of little use in their barbarous state. Therefore, the Advanced men helped them up the ladder. They were in no sense fiends; they *were* superior, and they realized that the progress of the Average men was necessary for their own development. They neither hated nor loved their brothers. How does the parasite feel toward his host?

The Advanced men kept in the background, although their cities and their physical appearance sifted down into legend. They knew what had put them in their

present position, and they worshipped cooperation with clear-eyed devotion. They knew the cardinal law of social control: the group being controlled must not realize that they are not their own masters.

As the average men developed a civilization of their own, the Advanced men destroyed their own cities and infiltrated the communities of the other men. Inasmuch as they had charted its development themselves, they had no difficulty in securing and maintaining positions of dominance. They were the lords of the manors, the powers behind the thrones. They let the other men fight and work and build, and they skimmed the gravy off for themselves.

But they had built a Frankenstein.

There is one trouble with progress: it never follows the same path twice, and it never unfolds quite the way it is supposed to. It is easy to start a boulder rolling down the side of a mountain, but it is something else again to try to check it in midflight.

The Average men began to catch up. Once technology took hold in their society, it snowballed as it always did. Invention followed invention, development followed development. There was no basic difference in the intelligence of the two groups; one simply had a sizable head start.

The Advanced men had to work to keep their superiority. They were very few in numbers, due to a culturally imposed breeding ban, and they began to worry. World War One had been an attempt on their part to smash the growing science of the other men, but it had backfired.

A menace arose from an unexpected source: archeology. So long as archeology had been the harmless pot-hunting pastime of a few eccentric antiquarians, it had been nothing, and no cause for alarm. But when scientific techniques had been introduced, when archeologists had turned their attention to an exhaustive reading of the record left in the earth, when they had begun to reconstruct the past . . .

The Advanced men had developed time travel in a hurry, and had altered the record so that it read what they wanted it to read. But time travel had proved tricky and difficult, and traces had remained — such as a plastic disc left in the dust of a centuries-dead Indian village.

They had altered the record, and they had done other things. They had tried to stop archeology. They had tried to stop it by ridiculing it, by cutting off its funds. They had worked subtly, planting questions. . . .

What good is it?

Why don't you spend that time doing something practical?

Why bother with all that precise data? What's a potsherd? Why not just dig for the fun of it?

They had planted men who would interpret the data in the way they wanted it interpreted. They had placed fascinating problems in the earth for the archeologists to play with — false problems. They had planted antagonism in fellow anthropologists, who tended to look with good-natured tolerance on their impractical compatriots. They had planted dogma: if you find something that you shouldn't find, cover it up again! Nobody will ever believe you!

They were good, these Advanced men. These same techniques were applied all through society, guiding it, directing it, holding it back.

But were they good enough?

The Average men were catching up, incredibly. The cattle were getting dangerous. Despite the best efforts of their masters, they were threatening to burst the bonds of earth entirely and flash outward to the stars. The Advanced men were inherently conservative, their very status and existence depending upon the maintenance of the status quo. And they were too few to follow their cattle to the stars.

"And so you see," Thomas Fitz-James concluded, tapping out his cold pipe in an ash-tray,

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These disappearances mount up; sooner or later we would paint a picture that all could read. We are at the moment toying with the idea of blasting your whole civilization back to barbarism, but for the moment we like things as they are. We are not unreasonable. You are rather a tall man, Bill."

Shackelford just sat there, in an unreal room, listening to an unreal giant. . . .

"All we ask of you," Fitz-James continued in his pleasant, well-modulated voice, as though he were discussing the weather, "is that you stick to the traditional theories in your teaching, that you discourage 'crackpot' research in your field, and refrain from it yourself. In other words, we are asking you to follow the path that will lead you to success in your profession. We are not ungrateful, you will find. We will help you; we will guarantee your success. And in time, with your height . . ."

Shackelford sighed, suddenly aware that he was very tired. "And if I don't?" he asked.

Fitz-James shrugged his huge shoulders. "Ridicule, Bill, and unhappiness. You will never get anywhere, and you will never do any good. It would be quite futile on your part to resist us, you see. We are immeasurably ahead of you technologically and socially; you cannot fight us with your

puny weapons. You would simply wind up in an insane asylum if you tried to tell others what I've told you tonight, and you know it. We are not harming you, we are helping you. You have everything to lose and nothing to gain by opposing us. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," said Shackelford. "Very clear."

Thomas Fitz-James got to his feet, towering over Shackelford. "I'll be going then, Bill. Thank you so much for the drinks, and feel free to drop in on me at any time." He extended his great hand. "Sorry about your wife, old man, but it was your fault."

Shackelford shook the big man's hand numbly and watched him go out the door. Then, for a long time, he simply stood there in the living room, unmoving.

"Sorry about your wife, old man, but it was your fault."

Bill Shackelford walked back through the little hall and into the bedroom. He threw himself on the bed, not even bothering to take off his clothes. He was exhausted, physically and emotionally. His brain reeled and staggered and he felt sick again. He lay there in the darkness, in a world that was no longer his world, in a universe gone mad.

The empty bed next to him stabbed at his soul.

He closed his eyes, not caring whether or not he ever opened

them again. His life was a chaos, a hideous joke. Out of all his past, all his learning, he knew only one thing with a terrible, icy certainty: he had looked upon the face of Evil.

VI

The little private universe in which we live is more, much more, than a mere random collection of people, buildings, villages and states. All of these things are tied together and made meaningful by the mental patterns, the culture sets, of the individual. We see what we have been trained to see.

For Bill Shackelford, the blinders had been taken off. He still saw the same things and did the same things, but they no longer meant what they were supposed to mean. He had never considered himself to be a naive man; he had, in fact, privately thought of himself as an emancipated, free thinker.

But he found that looking at the naked truth could be a jarring, heart-rending experience.

He stood in his office window and watched the students as they ebbed and flowed across the campus, responding to the steady pulls and thrusts of an artificial time system that bonged out the quarter hours on a bell. Some walked hurriedly, clutching their books, their eyes tired behind

smudged glasses. Others moved reluctantly, debating whether or not to cut class and get a beer. Still others, couples, held hands and played the oldest games in the world. He watched and he thought: all of them, every single one of them, are moving in a maze not of their own construction. They are running a maze, and when they get through they will get their crumb of food — a job, in which they will work until they die, keeping a system going for a race they have never even heard of.

He walked along the streets of the city and watched the people hurrying, always hurrying — to get to work, to get home from work, to grab a cup of coffee, to have a little fun before the alarm rang again. Who were they working for?

He read the newspapers. In one corner of the world men were busily blowing each other to bits. In another people argued about whether the men *should* blow each other to bits or not. In another men spoke of freedom. Still elsewhere politicians rode eagerly about on trains, damning their opponents with gusto and offering charming wondrous panaceas for happiness. In a car by the side of the road two lovers talked about getting married and raising a family. At a scientific congress scientists soberly decided that overpopulation was the cause for war.

Bill Shackelford was like the world he saw around him and he knew it. Outwardly he was "normal," doing his job. Inwardly he was being ripped apart by what he did and what he saw. He began to drink — not much, and not to excess, but enough to dull the edges of his perception. And even as he drank he thought: this, too, is part of the plan. This is what I'm supposed to do when I get mixed up, because it simply makes me ineffective and removes me as a vital factor in the total situation.

He went home at night to his home that was a home no longer. He sat in his living room with the lights out and his mind hurled its ceaseless, never-ending challenge at him: *what are you going to do about it!*

He fought out his battle alone. There were no bugles and drums, no flags, no medals, no pictures in the papers. He fought on a secret battleground, with his mind for a weapon. He fought in a world that spoke of war, but didn't know there was a war on.

What could he do?

He held on tight to a belief in what his work had meant to him. He held on to science as a tool in the search for truth. He did not worship it blindly — he simply felt that it was the only weapon in his arsenal that was good enough to work. He tackled

his problem as objectively as possible.

Somehow, it never occurred to him to give up.

The first thing to do was to determine what he couldn't do — and he soon found that that included almost everything. He could not, obviously, write a letter to the *Times* about it, or buy time to go on the radio and explain the situation. He could just see himself running through the fantastic story and offering as proof his little plastic disc and the fact that his wife was dead.

That was the short, direct route to the padded ward.

He couldn't write a book. It would be read, certainly, but what good would it do? It would undoubtedly form the basis for a new cult of some sort, be cited as proof of Atlantis, and filed on the Occult shelf in the library. Quite possibly, too, it would result in his Erasure. *Erasure*, he thought wryly. A lovely, expressive term. When you see something on the blackboard you don't want there, just whish! and away it goes.

He couldn't organize an underground movement to work for liberation. It was a nice, romantic idea, but it was hogwash. The cardinal principle of warfare was not to underestimate the enemy. They would know of an underground movement before it got started, and that would be that. There was something charmingly

innocent about the idea of a revolution, but it didn't appeal to Shackelford. Revolutions had a funny way of changing personnel and leaving the situation the same or worse.

It was too bad that life was not like fiction, he reflected. In fiction the good guys just got together and fought it out with the bad guys, and it was all beautifully simple and conclusive. One side utilized some damnably clever gimmick, and the other side gasped in despair and went down the drain. The hero and the heroine then gazed soulfully into each other's eyes and lived happily ever after — or at least until the next plot of the bad guys arose to be manfully thwarted. This wouldn't have been much of a story, Shackelford thought ruefully. He was a poor excuse for a hero, the heroine was dead, and there simply wasn't going to be any pat solution to it all. . . .

What is the solution to life? Shackelford knew that there wasn't any, not in the usual sense of the term. The really significant changes in the story of man had been relatively small things, unnoticed, for the most part, until long after they had changed the course of history for good and all. Small things — a fish that got caught in the mud and flopped desperately in a world without water trying to breathe. A little mammal that climbed into the

trees and another one that came down out of the trees. A man who was nailed to a Cross as a heretic and another who took a trip on a boat and wrote a book about what he had seen. A man who wrote an equation about mass and energy, and another who listened to the grinding chaos of a city and wrote a symphony about it. . . .

Shackelford stared at the darkness. What could *he* do?

There was no answer.

Autumn had flashed its crimson colors and given way to the soot-gray of winter before Shackelford began to get an answer. He was sitting in the living room thinking about Dawn, when a slow question intruded itself on his mind.

Why had they had to kill her?

He got to his feet and lit a cigarette. They had killed her, obviously, because they wanted to warn him in a way that he would never forget. They had wanted to warn him because he was becoming dangerous. . . .

Dangerous.

"Damn," he said aloud.

He had been a fool. He had accepted what Fitz-James had told him at its face value — at the value which Fitz-James himself had put on it. He had accepted the myth of their invincibility, accepted the fact that they were somehow "superior." He had been told that he was helpless, and he had swallowed it.

Why had he been told anything at all?

He thought back, carefully, over what Fitz-James had told him. That was data. What could he make of it?

I'm *dangerous* to them, he thought. *Why?*

He examined the self-styled Advanced men. What was the one cardinal fact of their history, the one overriding principle? *They had made a discovery very early, that of cooperation, and they had progressed a sum total of no distance since that time.* They had never even developed the concept of cooperation to its logical conclusion. It had never even occurred to them to cooperate on equal terms with other men, even when it was to their own ultimate advantage. The deal they had offered Shackelford was a handout, a master's reward to a good slave.

They were over-specialized. They had made a beautifully exact adjustment to an existing situation, and they had never changed it. They had developed techniques for enhancing their position, developed a wonderfully elaborate system for maintaining it, but they had never modified their basic adaptation even a particle. Their very existence depended upon a basic situation.

And now the situation was changing.

The Advanced men were so

convinced of their own superiority they weren't bothering to meet the changing conditions. They knew they would come out on top; they always had. Shackelford suddenly realized that Fitz-James was undoubtedly more progressive than the others in his grasp of the problem, and even he had exhibited an amazing nonunderstanding of the men he was trying to control. He had murdered a man's wife and then extended his hand in tolerant friendship.

Shackelford poured himself a drink. Who was "superior?" What did the evidence show? *It showed that the men who had been dominated and driven and tricked had slowly closed the gap between the two groups. It showed that they were catching up despite the best efforts of the others to stop them.*

The Advanced men were too few to follow their cattle to the stars.

"We're winning," Shackelford said incredulously, loudly. "We're winning."

Or were they? The jockeying for position that was taking place all around him in the world suddenly assumed new and vast significance. If the spirit of free inquiry could be maintained, if men could be taught to keep open minds and search for truth — they would win. If darkness closed again, if truth were tabooed, if a totalitarian state dictated what

should and should not be done —

The lonely battle of the searcher for truth was, with startling clarity, all-important. The men in the laboratories, the men who probed into minds to see what made them tick, the solitary worker living with a forgotten tribe in Africa — they were fighting the battle for all of mankind.

If they won, then man would ultimately triumph over his masters and go on to a destiny of his own making. There would be chaos and violence beyond imagining, but man would one day triumph.

When the time was right —

If they could keep the spark of truth alive —

There were others who knew. There were others who realized that the time was premature — that they had the toughest, loneliest job in the world to do — a job that had to be done. . . .

"I'll deny everything I've said, Bill," the old man had said to him, so long ago. "I can't help you any further, and you'd be wasting your time to come back to me. You'll have to go your own way, as I went mine. You'll understand, before you're through. Just use your head, boy, just use your head, d'you see?"

Shackelford saw, at last. There was to be no glory in this fight, and no thanks. He didn't care. His wife had died, and it was up to him to make her death something a little more than meaning-

less. He didn't know, he couldn't be sure, about the outcome. Could men learn? Could they keep climbing?

He didn't know — but he had to try.

It was late in the semester before he had his answer.

It was a small thing, really, that told him what he had to know in order to go on living. It seemed, suddenly, that life was made up of small things, insignificant things, pushing and nudging and reacting in tiny darknesses where no one could see them. Small things made the difference: a plastic gear, a chance remark, a cell that functioned or died. All the big things, the sensational things, were simply the result of a mass of tiny reactions that could not be grasped and appreciated. . . .

Even the atomic bomb.

Shackelford was lecturing on theory to his freshman class. It was a large classroom, empty of personality, filled with a blur of faces and the scratch and scribble of fountain pens as the students took notes. It was a cold and gloomy winter day, just before the Christmas holidays, and it was stuffy and warm in the room. All the windows were closed against the winter chill, and little eddies of cigarette smoke curled up toward the ceiling and formed a bluish, unmoving cloud there, a murky miniature heaven.

Shackelford talked, sitting on the edge of his desk, interested as always in his subject, but painfully aware of the fact that half of his class was mentally absent, despite the superficial bright eyes and intent postures.

"And so Morgan and the other early social evolutionists painted a charmingly simple and unreal picture of changing society," he said, watching the blue smoke and wishing that he had mastered the technique of smoking while lecturing. "They felt that all peoples passed through successive stages, from Savagery to Barbarism to Civilization. They failed to take such factors as diffusion into consideration, and later work has proved them wrong in almost every detail — as, for instance, the case of various nomadic herders who never went through an agricultural stage. Despite Leslie White, most anthropologists today don't take social evolution very seriously, and have turned for their answers to other concepts, such as those of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in England. . . ."

He paused, seeing a hand in the air. It belonged to — what was his name? — Barnes, that was it. "Yes, Mr. Barnes?" he said. "You had a question?"

"Yes, sir." The voice was apologetic, but determined. "I beg your pardon, but how do you

know that social evolution did not take place? Just because you disprove one particular sequence, does that invalidate the whole idea? Please understand that I'm not questioning your authority, but how can you possibly *KNOW*?"

Shackelford stared at the boy — he was only a kid — so young and earnest on the second row. He felt a warm glow in his stomach, and his hand shook a little. He broke his own rule and lit a cigarette. He remembered that other Bill Shackelford, long ago in a faraway world of spring, interrupting a professor . . .

"*Pardon me, sir, but how do you KNOW?*"

He looked at the kid on the second row. A nice kid, he thought, a kid from a pleasant home, a kid "going to college." A kid cursed with a mind, but not knowing what that meant yet. A kid who might grow up and one day stand where Shackelford was standing now . . .

Bill Shackelford looked at him and thought: *One day you may face it too, boy. One day you may find out the score in this game we are playing. One day you may wake up as I did, to find your wife vanished from your side. One day you may have to fight your fight as I fought mine — and by then I pray that you will be ready to win. And what can I say to you now, boy, so young and not knowing*

what you have to face? What can I offer you, one fighter to another, across a room that is ignorant of the battle around it? What can I say to you, that you may one day remember and know that you are not alone?

Shackelford said, "Your name is Barnes, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." The voice was a little scared now. "Forrest Barnes."

"Well, Forrest," Shackelford said slowly, "you've just made an 'A' in this course, and I'd like to talk to you later. Your question is a good one, and I'm glad you asked it." Glad, he thought. What a pitiful word. "Don't ever take anything on authority — think it through for yourself. Don't ever stop asking questions, and remember, if you ever need a lift, that others are asking them too. You were dead right in your objection, and if you catch me up on anything else, just sing out. End of sermon — and thanks for your help."

He went on with his lecture then, conscious of the sub-murmurs of the rest of the class. What a screwball, they were thinking. Where does Barnes get off making an 'A' before the

final? His old man must be on the Board of Regents.

But Shackelford watched Barnes' flushed and excited face, and he knew that what he had said had struck home. It was just a hot and stuffy classroom, but for Shackelford it was suddenly beautiful. He had found his answer. Could men learn, could they keep climbing? Was he a freak, or were there other men who would fight their way up to the truth?

Would man ever be free, free of the clay and free in the stars?

He knew now, at last and for always, that they would.

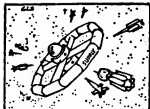
That evening, when Bill Shackelford walked through the evening across the cold campus, the weather was raw but he did not notice it. The cold wind blew and the mechanical city whined around the school, but there was a song in his heart.

Man would be free.

There were no flags, no cheering thousands, no triumphal music. But as he walked along, shoes clicking on the cold cement, toward his car and toward his empty home where a part of him had died, Bill Shackelford whistled a little tune into the teeth of the world.

. . . THE Universe may be more like the untutored man's common-sense conception of it than had seemed possible a generation ago.

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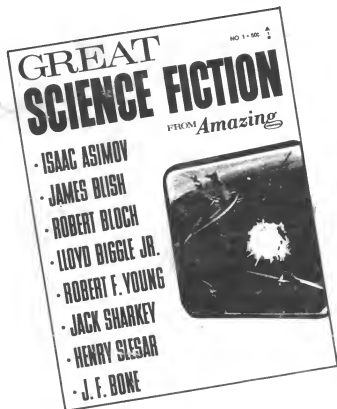
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